

According to George Sayer, C.S.Lewis once ‘remarked that, if he were not a confirmed bachelor, Ruth Pitter would be the woman he would like to marry’ (197). As this fact has proved of interest to so many, I feared the author would make it the centerpiece of his book and we would learn little about Ruth Pitter the poet.

I need not have worried. This is a remarkably fine book, and Ruth Pitter the Poet is what it is primarily about. Don King was more than qualified to undertake to write it, for he understands and loves poetry. I would be very surprised to learn if there is any of Ruth Pitter’s poetry, published or unpublished, he has not read. Furthermore, the author lets us know in the Introduction what kind of poetry we will sample along the way. ‘Pitter’, he said, ‘in contrast to T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and W.H. Auden, is a traditional poet in the line of George Herbert, Thomas Traherne, Thomas Hardy, A.E. Housman, W.B. Yeats, and Philip Larkin. She rarely experimented with meter or verse form, nor did she explore modernist themes or offer critiques of modern English society. Instead, she worked with familiar meters and verse forms, and the essential subject of her poetry is the human condition,’ (xiii).

Ruth Pitter was born in 1897, the daughter of a school master, George Pitter, at Ilford, Essex. When she and her brother and sister were children, the family went for walks in Hainault Forest, part of the ancient hunting forest in Epping. They later rented Oak Cottage on Crabtree Hill in the forest, and Ruth came to regard this as her real home. It was as much a character in her life as Little Lea or The Kilns were in the life of C.S. Lewis.

Encouraged by her father, Ruth published her first poems at the age of thirteen. I must admit that I cannot see from the poems she wrote during these early years why her first publisher, A.R. Orage, editor of *New Age*, believed so strongly in her talent. But he was right, and we see in this very readable book how she never stopped growing as a poet.

But it was to be many years before Ruth Pitter enjoyed the leisure to give much of her time to poetry. She had a hard life. She was only seventeen when the First World War broke out, and as the family could not afford to send her to University, she became a clerk in the War Office. At the end of the War, she became a painter for the Walberswick Peasant Pottery Company in Suffolk. Somehow she found time for poetry, and the first volume of her work, *First Poems* was published in 1920. One of those who had come to admire her poetry was Hilaire Belloc, who liked her verse so much he paid the lion’s share of the cost of publishing her second and third volumes, *First and Second Poems* (1927) and *Persephone in Hades* (1931).

When the Peasant Pottery Company moved to London, Ruth went with them. A slump in 1930 made her job precarious and she and a fellow worker, Kathleen O'Hara, began a similar business of their own called Deane and Forester, which specialised in painting decorative trays and furniture. The young women set up house together in Chelsea, and remained together until Miss O'Hara's death many years later. It was there that Ruth Pitter published several more volumes of poetry, *A Mad Lady's Garland* (1934), *A Trophy of Arms* (1936)—which won the Hawthornden Prize in 1937—and *The Spirit Watches* (1939). One of those who wrote to congratulate her on *A Trophy of Arms* was the Oxford don and member of the Inklings, Lord David Cecil, who was to become a life-long friend. 'I cannot tell you', wrote Lord David, 'what a ray of light spread out on my horizon to discover that some one cared still to write such firm spontaneous glowing poetry' (82).

By the time the Second World War broke out in 1939, Ruth and Miss O'Hara had a thriving business. During their struggle to keep going, Ruth had a letter from Lord David of February 1941, in which he said: 'I shared [your poetry] with C.S. Lewis...& he was deeply struck & went off to buy your poems' (103). On 13 July 1942 she wrote to Lord David saying: 'I have found the book which has excited me more than anything has done for a long time—*The Screwtape Letters*' (114).

The struggle to keep Deane and Forester going ended in 1943, when the two ladies went to work in Morgen's Crucible Factory, within walking distance of their flat. Recalling the horror of the war, Ruth Pitter said: 'I stopped in the middle of Battersea Bridge one dreadful night in March when it was cold. It was dark as the pit, and I stood and leaned against the parapet and thought—like this I *cannot* go on. And it didn't come to me at once but some time afterwards I heard the broadcasts talks of C.S. Lewis, and I at once grappled them to my soul...I could see by hard argument there was only the one way for it. I had to be intellectually satisfied as well as emotionally because at that time of life one doesn't just fall into it in adolescent emotion, and I was satisfied at every point that it was the one way and the hard way to do things' (118). Ruth read every word of Lewis she could find, and after she was received into the Church of England in 1946, she told a friend that she was driven to Christianity 'by the pull of C.S. Lewis and the push of misery' (142). She somehow managed during this difficult period to publish three volumes of poems: *The Rude Potato* (1941), *The Bridge. Poems 1939-1944* (1945), and *Pitter on Cats* (1946).

Ruth Pitter had wanted for years to meet C.S. Lewis, and knowing a mutual friend was about to visit him in May 1946, she wrote: 'I daresay he never heard of me, but I wish you would tell him that his work is the joy of my life' (142).

After an exchange of letters they met for the first time on 17 July 1946. They liked one another very much, and thus began a friendship important to both.

In 1952, Ruth and Kathleen O'Hara bought a retirement cottage, the Hawthorns, in Long Crendon, near Oxford, where they had a garden. Ruth loved growing potatoes in particular. It also meant she would be near Lewis and other friends. George Sayer and Owen Barfield took Lewis to Long Crendon a number of times. It is unfortunate that Lewis did not preserve Miss Pitter's letters, but those he wrote to her are found in the second and third volumes of his *Collected Letters* (2004; 2006). Whether Ruth hoped for more than friendship we will probably never know, but we can at least follow the course of that friendship in this excellent biography.

Despite the fact that I knew the details of their friendship before reading this book, my heart sank when I reached the chapter entitled 'Lurking in the Undergrowth, 1950-1953'. 'Whatever possibility existed for some future romantic relationship between Lewis and Pitter', wrote Don King, 'was about to be complicated by the arrival of American Joy Davidman Gresham into the life of Lewis' (192). Hoping they might become friends, Lewis invited Ruth and Joy to lunch at the Eastgate Hotel on 1 February 1954. It was the first and only time they met. Reflecting on Lewis's marriage to Joy Gresham, Dr King said: 'I believe Gresham "won" Lewis because of her passionate, aggressive, winner-take-all attitude towards romantic love, as revealed in her love poetry, while Pitter "lost" Lewis because of her dispassionate, reserved, you-must-win-me attitude towards romantic love, as revealed in her love poetry' (196).

The idea of Joy 'winning' leaves out too much of the complexity of the real situation. The civil marriage between Lewis and Joy in 1956 was entered into because Joy's passport was not being renewed, and 'marriage' made it possible for her to remain in Britain. Their ecclesiastical marriage in 1957 resulted from the fact that Joy was thought to be dying, and she wanted to die as Lewis's wife. Writing to Dom Bede Griffiths in September 1957, Lewis said: 'It is nice to have arrived at all this by something which began in Agape, proceeded to Philia, then became Pity, and only after that, Eros' (*Collected Letters* III, 884.) In any event, Joy did not want Ruth as a friend, and though Lewis suggested that she write to Joy, Ruth later said: 'I did from time to time write to her: but there never was a reply, so I decided to be thankful for this correspondence and friendship with so rare a creature as Lewis, and to leave it at that' (312).

We must not imagine that Ruth Pitter went into a decline after Joy appeared. The move to the Hawthorns coincided with what appears to me the most productive period of her life. Following the publication of *The Ermine: Poems 1942-1952* (1953), she was awarded the Queen's Gold Medal for Poetry in 1955. At the same time, she became a familiar voice on BBC radio, appearing more than forty times between 1956 and 1966. Someday I hope Dr King will edit

Ruth Pitter's essays, for she wrote some of the best pieces on poetry I've ever read. It's a pity this volume does not contain her brilliant address 'A Return to Poetic Law', in which she said: 'Contemporary poetry is now cut off from the generality of English-speaking people. It has become a minor specialist's subject like stamp collecting. The public has not deserted poetry; it is poetry which has deserted the great public' (168). By this time she had reflected for many years on the Gospel, and in 'A Return to Poetic Law' she insisted that 'the first two laws of poetry, as of all human affairs, are love of God and love of one's neighbour' (170).

Those laws are well illustrated in some of poems published after the move to Long Crendon, the best of which found their way into her final volumes, *Collected Poems: 1990* (1990) and *Collected Poems* (1996). She was made a Companion of Honour in 1974 and a Commander of the British Empire in 1979. Kathleen O'Hara died in 1973, and shortly before Ruth's death on 29 February 1992 she went blind. I was visiting Owen Barfield when we learned of her death. We put down our tea cups in silent homage.

I first met Ruth Pitter in 1970, and as we began meeting and writing to one another, it became clear that we shared a great love for C.S. Lewis and his books. What struck me very forcibly was her gratitude for Lewis' *friendship*. This caused me to remember that, during the brief period when I was his secretary, I said to Lewis, 'You don't strike me as a *married* man,' to which he replied 'I've always been a bachelor at heart'. I expect some will think me naïve, but I have come to believe that Friendship—defined by Lewis as 'that luminous, tranquil, rational world of relationships freely chosen'—might have been better for both Lewis and Ruth Pitter than marriage. So, perhaps she *did* 'win'. Still, after hearing several of the Inklings, notably Colin Hardie and Hugo Dyson, say what a perfect wife Ruth would make Lewis, I mentioned this to her one time. 'They also wonder', I said, 'whether you would have *accepted* him'. For a moment I feared I'd gone too far. But as Ruth turned away briefly, I saw her smile.

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