

Elsie Pomeroy and Sir Charles G.D. Roberts

By John Coldwell Adams

Elsie Pomeroy, who had recently turned seventy-three when I first met her in Toronto early in 1960, struck me initially as a female Ancient Mariner, compelled to tell the story of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts over and over again. Unlike the Wedding Guest in Coleridge's poem, however, I was not a reluctant listener who could not choose but hear. On the contrary, I felt privileged to be afforded a glimpse of the seventeen-year association that lay behind her biography of Roberts, completed just a few months before his death.

What I saw was not the generally accepted view of their relationship. Although I felt that Miss Pomeroy's competence as a literary critic was still in question, she soon dispelled my suspicions about her common sense. I saw how unjust it was to dismiss her as a gullible and slightly ridiculous maiden schoolteacher with a blind crush on an impoverished old charmer. Nor was it fair to picture Roberts as a selfish and unfeeling bounder who took advantage of her steadfast devotion.

Our first meeting came about at the prompting of Philip Child, my kindly adviser at the University of Toronto, during a discussion of my proposed biography of Sir Gilbert Parker. "Get in touch with my friend Elsie Pomeroy," he suggested. "She knew many of the Canadian writers who belonged to Roberts' era."

"Yes," Miss Pomeroy told me when we were seated in the comfortable clutter of her College Street apartment. "I met Sir Gilbert Parker at the Canadian Chautauqua in Muskoka, back in 1926. Charles G. D. Roberts introduced us."

Jumping from her chair, she hurried across the room to hunt for a picture of Parker that had been taken during his Muskoka visit. She was a plumpish, sparrow-like woman, who, as I was soon to learn, was always hopping up to search for something. In spite of a spinal curvature that had caused back problems all her life, she was sprightly and quick in her movements; and her animated expression offset the plainness of her face and the severity with which her gray-

streaked hair was drawn back in a tight bun.

She was forthright in her disapproval of Sir Gilbert Parker. "I sat beside him during a lantern-slide show on his first night at the Chautauqua," she confided. "I don't know where his *thoughts* were; but, as soon as we were in the dark, his *hand* was on my knee! I pushed it aside and stayed out of his reach for the rest of his visit, even though Roberts suggested that I might have mistaken an innocent nudge for undue familiarity. Roberts was always quick to give other people the benefit of the doubt — often too quick, in my opinion."

At that point, I acknowledged that while I had become fascinated by the rise of Sir Gilbert Parker from backwoods obscurity to the "seats of the mighty," I felt that Roberts had possessed a more attractive personality and had demonstrated a far greater literary talent. Miss Pomeroy reacted (if I may use the analogy of the Ancient Mariner one last time) as if she were thinking: "I know the man that must hear me; / To him my tale I teach." Although I discovered later that she was always ready to talk about Sir Charles to anyone who would listen — in fact, many of her acquaintances felt that she had become a bore on the subject — I doubt whether she ever divulged as much information to anyone else as she ultimately shared with me. During the remaining eight years of her life, we met at least once a month (frequently more often); and, as time passed, I was taken deeper into her confidence.

Although we seldom argued about it, we held differing opinions about Roberts' long suit as a writer. To Elsie (as she insisted upon being called) he was first and foremost THE POET: privately, she confessed that she kept a copy of his *Selected Poems* by her bedside to read every night before she went to sleep; publicly, she declared that he became "the subject of my hero-worship"¹ after she first read his poem "Canada" in public school. I might have scoffed at her early adulation if I had not remembered my boyhood veneration for the author of stories such as "The Winged Scourge of the Dark." His animal heroes fascinated me, and his descriptive passages — depicting the rural areas of the Maritimes exactly as I had seen them — filled me with admiration. When he wrote that "The windless grey-violet dusk, soft as a mole's fur, brooded low over the bushy upland pasture,"² I could attest that it was a perfect description of the way night settled down over my grandfather's backwoods farm. Only a few of his poems, notably "Tantramar Revisited," ever struck me as being equal to the best of those animal stories. Elsie, never wavering from the preferences she had developed as a

schoolgirl, could not agree.

Those formative school days began in the village of Fullerton, Ontario, where Elsie May Pomeroy was born on 20 November 1886, the eldest of the six surviving children of Richard and Susan (Davis) Pomeroy. Being especially proud of her paternal origins, she would one day design a personalized bookplate showing the picturesque ruins of the Berry Pomeroy Castle in Devon, England. After a year of high school in the nearby town of Mitchell, she proceeded to the Normal School in Stratford. Her subsequent teaching career included a stint of more than three years in St. Thomas before she moved to Toronto where she was employed by the Board of Education from 1914 until her retirement in 1949. During most of that time, she taught a grade eight class at the King Edward Public School on Bathurst Street, an easy walk from her apartment.

Reminiscing about her long tenure at King Edward, Elsie liked to quote a school inspector, who wrote in his report: "Miss Pomeroy's class is a good average in mathematics and social studies, but there is not another class in the city that can touch it in English." He might have been more precise if he had said that her class was unmatched in its knowledge of Canadian poetry, particularly the work of the so-called "Confederation Poets." To this day, there are many of her former students who still remember committing to memory such poems as "The Laughing Sally," "Buie Annajohn," and "The Song My Paddle Sings."

Her personal slogan — "Always keep a step ahead of your students" — might not have served her as well as it did if she had been less wily and inventive. Once when she was planning a noon picnic to Toronto's High Park, she hit upon a scheme to keep her class from disturbing the other streetcar passengers with their noise. "I'm going to teach you how to talk on your fingers," she announced. "If we practise on the streetcar, we can find out what it's like for deaf-mutes to travel." Her students responded with enthusiasm, and the ride passed with a constant flurry of gestures, but not a single word was spoken. "However, my strategy was only partly successful," she recalled with a wry chuckle. "I hadn't made any plans for the return ride because I had expected that they would be tired and subdued. Instead, all the pent-up boisterousness of the morning burst forth on the way home!"

Never one to sit back and let others do all the work, she played an active role in supporting her professional organizations. After an interlude as an exchange teacher in London, England, following

World War I, she was elected president of the Women Teachers Association of Toronto (1926-27), and represented the Public School Teachers Association of Toronto at an international conference in Elsinor, Denmark, in 1929. The following year, she was elected president of the Toronto Council of Teachers, which represented all the teaching organizations in the city. During the `thirties, she was the convener of the educational committee of the local Council of Women, and served on the editorial board of *The Educational Courier* (the official organ of the Public School Teachers of Ontario) to which she contributed frequently as a writer. From 1928 until shortly before her retirement, she held various executive positions in the Federation of Women Teachers' Associations of Ontario.

She joined the Canadian Authors Association in 1927 after hesitating for a long time because she felt that it was presumptuous to aspire to membership when her literary production consisted of a mere handful of articles in a few educational and religious periodicals. It was Charles G. D. Roberts, with whom she had formed an instant friendship in 1926, who convinced her that every published writer was entitled to belong to the CAA. Roberts himself had accepted the presidency of the Toronto Branch of the CAA shortly after his return in 1925 from nearly eighteen years abroad. In 1927, he was elected national president for a two-year term, after which he held the title of honorary president until his death. Throughout his continued leadership, Elsie hovered discreetly in the background although it became increasingly apparent to the other members, nationally as well as locally, that she was Roberts' shadow, self-effacing but inseparable. She came into her own after publishing his biography, and went on to become president of the Toronto Branch (1947-50) and a long-term treasurer of the National Association.

"But there's something about her makes others seem slack,"³ Roberts said of Elsie, although she possessed neither youth nor beauty, the combination that usually delighted him most in his female acquaintances. He had introduced himself to her on the way to the Chautauqua in Muskoka, and quickly found that he had discovered one of his greatest fans. Few writers are immune to flattery, and it is not surprising that he basked in Elsie's uncritical, almost reverential, appreciation of his literary efforts. Besides, she was so level-headed in other respects, and possessed such an acute sense of humour, that it was impossible to regard her as a mindless sycophant. In short, although she was not the type of woman to whom he was sexually attracted, he found her extremely

companionable and good for his morale. That much he realized at once; in time, he would learn to value her unfailing loyalty and devotion.

The homage that Elsie paid to Roberts-the-writer differed from the esteem in which she held Roberts-the-man. She was convinced that every product of his pen, from poetry to travel guides, "was written in the Roberts tradition that made it literature";⁴ nothing ever sank to the level of mediocrity. As for the man, although she found him worthy of her hero worship, she was not oblivious to his shortcomings. Even as she excused him for abandoning his wife, she sympathized with the "lonely woman"⁵ who could not understand the reasons for his behaviour. She characterized some of his extramarital infatuations as "unworthy,"⁶ and knew that he could act like a "silly"⁷ old man (he was sixty-seven and she was thirty-nine when they first met) around attractive young women. Nevertheless, she felt that he was the most chivalrous and charming man she had ever known, and steadfastly maintained that "whatever his failings and weaknesses may be, he would not, he could not be unkind."⁸ As she grew to adore Roberts-the-man, her love may not have been unquestionably platonic, but neither was it completely blind.

By the time he met Elsie, Roberts had decided that his biography should be written during his lifetime while he could still exercise some control over it. Lorne Pierce of the Ryerson Press, who was his first choice for the project, had already begun some preliminary research, but by 1930 other commitments compelled him to withdraw. A.M. Pound, a businessman and litterateur from Vancouver, was eager to replace Pierce, but his ambitions were thwarted by his untimely death in 1932 at the age of thirty-eight. Roberts' son Lloyd aspired to the task, but he could not be trusted (or so his father feared) to leave family skeletons in the closet. However, there remained Elsie Pomeroy, an amateur writer whose discretion could be taken for granted. The idea of selecting her had occurred to Roberts after reading a graceful little essay that she had pieced together from his anecdotes about his childhood. If she lacked the expertise of a professional, that handicap could be neatly overcome by his personal coaching.

As soon as Roberts was certain that Pierce would not reconsider, Elsie became his "authorized" biographer, and by 1936 the work was well underway. It was a bond that drew them even closer together as they reconstructed his life and — by omitting

some of the facts — reshaped it. To assure Pierce, the prospective publisher, that Elsie would produce a satisfactory manuscript, Roberts insisted that her version was almost a "camouflaged autobiography,"⁹ and stressed that he had worked "tremendously hard over it."¹⁰ He gave Pierce (and others) the impression that he was practically dictating his memoirs to Elsie.

She always resented the assumption that she had been little more than Roberts' amanuensis. Yes, she conceded, it was true that he had pondered over the past to the point of exhaustion, and had been painstakingly diligent in referring to his family and other sources to jog and corroborate his undocumented memory. He had "supplied the greater part of the information,"¹¹ but the drudgery of shaping it and putting it into orderly prose had been hers alone. It was her practice to read the chapters to him for his approval and suggestions as she completed them, one by one; but, judging from her comments to me, his main contribution at that juncture was an inadequate attempt to modify her effusions over his poetry and prose. After his ill-advised remarks about the autobiographical nature of the work, he had good reason to fear that her readers might think they detected blatant self-admiration in the book.

Being of one mind about which personal matters should be excluded, they had no cause for debate on that score. He had not always lived up to his high ideals, but Elsie believed that he deserved to be judged by his triumphs rather than his failures. Nor could she condemn him for the unintentional heartache he often inflicted by his reluctance to face painful confrontations — hurting people by *not wanting* to hurt them. The biography does not hide the fact that Roberts admired many women and enjoyed their company, but there are no direct references to his numerous extramarital affairs. His eventual desertion of his wife was impossible to ignore, but Elsie dealt with it in a single paragraph, explaining that "there was a lack of understanding and mutual interests . . . and after a few years he became addicted to living in a studio."¹² When I commented upon the "delicacy" of that passage, Elsie replied: "I worried over the wording; but, when I read that whole section to Roberts, he didn't suggest any changes."

Roberts' first wife was dead before Elsie began the biography, and he did not marry again until the book was in print. In a "Final Chapter," which appeared in *The Canadian Author and Bookman* after Roberts' death, Elsie reported his second marriage in three terse sentences:

On October 28, in Holy Trinity Church, Toronto, Sir Charles was married to Miss Joan Montgomery. The Rector, Rev. C. John Frank officiated. The poet's son Lloyd was present at the ceremony.¹³

Although she had plenty more to say privately, that was her first and last "official" reference to the woman with whom Roberts had been having a serious affair during the whole time that the biography had been in progress. Elsie was not alone in her disapproval of his marriage to a woman who was younger than his granddaughter, but it is unlikely that anyone else ever equalled her vehemence in denouncing Joan for "dragging his name through the mud."¹⁴ Almost to the day she died, she continued to fulminate against the marriage as "the ignominious ending to a great career."¹⁵

It is tempting to speculate that Elsie's bitterness may have been fueled by a secret desire to claim the title of Lady Roberts for herself. However, while I do not totally discount that possibility, I remain convinced that her paramount concern was over the damage she fancied had been done to Roberts' reputation. To see her idol come crashing down (as she believed) after all that she had done to protect him, was more than she could endure. She refused ever to see him again, although she made several emotional telephone calls to his apartment. Once, when Joan answered unexpectedly, saying "Lady Roberts speaking," Elsie was so infuriated that she shouted "Go to hell!" and slammed down the receiver. Charles Lynch claims that she said "Lady Roberts, my ass!"¹⁶ but anyone who knew Elsie would realize that either Lynch or his informant changed the wording for comic effect. Elsie never deviated from her idiosyncratic standards of permissible language: if the provocation was great enough, a hearty "hell" or "damn" might be condoned, but not the vernacular terminology for certain body parts or their functions.

Elsie had known for several years that Roberts was leading a double life, dividing his time between herself and Joan; but she completely misjudged the depth of his emotional commitment to the latter. She believed that the affair was no more likely to lead to marriage than any of his other "unworthy" involvements that she had chosen to ignore. Being equally certain that Joan was the sort of woman that she would dislike instinctively, she made a point of avoiding her. Joan, on her part, seems to have resented Roberts' unshakable dependence upon his biographer. Ironically, the two

women had a lot of common interests besides their devotion to the same man. Knowing Elsie as I did, and later enjoying a frank correspondence with Joan, I have reason to believe that they might have become friends if the circumstances had been different.

Being the product of a strict moral upbringing, Elsie always worried about the public's perception of her alliance with Roberts. As she once told me, she did not want anyone to think that she was playing Wallis Simpson opposite an aging equivalent of the Prince of Wales. She was particularly distressed that her mother (who knew little about poetry, but thought she could spot an old lecher when she saw one) continued to treat the relationship as if it were a scandal. When Elsie presented a copy of the completed biography to her parents, Mrs. Pomeroy insisted that the book be kept out of sight whenever visitors came to call. Even worse than having the platonic affair misunderstood, however, was Elsie's later ordeal of facing all the people (especially her mother!) who thought that Roberts had jilted her and made her a laughingstock.

If Roberts had lived until Elsie's hurt and anger had begun to subside, the chances are that a reconciliation would have taken place. Sadly, however, time was not on his side, and he died of heart failure in less than a month after his marriage. "The brave spirit . . . was finally forced to capitulate,"¹⁷ Elsie wrote, covertly implying that his health and strength had been undermined by more than his advancing years. The longer she thought about it, the more convinced she became that his son Lloyd had taken revenge upon her for writing the biography by pressuring his exhausted old father into marriage against his will. By putting most of the blame upon Lloyd, she could forgive Roberts at last.

Beginning by secretly assisting Lorne Pierce with Roberts' funeral arrangements, Elsie resumed the task of burnishing his image. At her instigation, the Toronto Branch of the Canadian Authors Association held an annual Roberts Night on the anniversary of his birth until time eventually decimated the ranks of the faithful. For more than twenty years, she perpetuated his memory in numerous articles, public lectures, and specially designed Christmas cards and booklets. Guarding his reputation with a proprietorial eye, she was quick to rush to his defence whenever she felt that a latter-day critic was giving him less than his due. Even Desmond Pacey, who paid generous tributes to Roberts' ability and influence, earned her enduring wrath for daring to suggest that her hero was "not a great national poet."¹⁸

Elsie's greatest treasure was a thick bundle of letters that Roberts had written to her between 1926 and 1943. Increasingly, as she grew older, she worried about the proper disposal of this correspondence. She shrank from the thought of destroying it, but she hesitated to send it to Mount Allison University where she had started a collection of Roberts memorabilia. Although she had quoted a few fragments in the biography (without identifying herself as the recipient), she felt that many of the passages were too personal to be in the public domain. On several occasions she showed me one of the letters — I remember seeing four of them — and each time she would ask: "What should I do about them?" My reply was always the same: "Don't destroy any of them! Blot out certain lines, if you feel you must, but send all of the letters to Mount Allison." My hopes that she would follow my advice were dashed when she telephoned early one Saturday morning in an unusually despondent mood. "You will probably think that I have done the wrong thing," she said, "but I burned all of Roberts' letters last night."

In the final year of her life, Elsie began to suffer momentary periods of disorientation. Gradually, those spells increased in length and frequency until her family decided that it was no longer safe for her to live alone in an apartment. I shall never forget the evening when she telephoned to say that she was ready to move "somewhere to an Old Folks Home." First, she told me that she was going to Oshawa, then she said Ottawa; still later, she thought it was Orillia. "There will not be room for all of my pictures and mementos of Roberts," she lamented. "I'd like for you to have some of the things that I can't take with me. Could you come down tonight? Tomorrow, my brother and his wife will be here to start the packing."

I found her huddled in her rocking chair with the light turned low. Gone was all the sprightliness with which she usually bustled around the room. Instead, without rising, she gestured wearily towards the pictures that covered the walls, indicating that I could have as many of them as I wanted. I looked around covetously, but only after she became insistent could I bring myself to take anything. Finally, hoping all the while that I was not choosing any of her special favourites, I selected four items: framed original manuscripts of "Westcock Hill" and "Spirit Beauty"; a Karsh photograph of Duncan Campbell Scott, autographed by the subject; and a small gouache by Goodridge Roberts. I sat down to chat; but, although she seemed pleased to have company, she was unable to concentrate upon any topic. As I rose to kiss her good-bye, I had a feeling that she would not survive very long in her new

surroundings. Sad to say, my premonition was correct.

Long afterwards, when I wrote *Sir Charles God Damn: The Life of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts*, my indebtedness to Elsie Pomeroy was enormous. Although I was taking a different approach from her biography of Roberts, the material that she had amassed was one of my most valuable sources of information. Furthermore, I took at face value the engaging figure that emerges from her pages — I truly believe that Roberts possessed all of the admirable traits that Elsie saw in him. I would qualify her claims for his literary genius, but everything else she said about him was the truth, albeit not the whole truth. Admittedly, she kept silent about certain aspects of his character because she respected his desire to be judged by his strengths instead of his weaknesses. In our private conversations, however, she revealed her conviction that the qualities she had admired most in him were accentuated, not diminished, by his human frailties. That particular attitude of hers was my strongest influence in writing *Sir Charles God Damn*, even though I knew how horrified she would have been by my gentle attempts at revisionism.

Pace, Elsie! If there is some chiaroscuro in my portrait of Roberts, it is there because I learned from you how his resplendent personality was highlighted by shadow. The man I tried to depict was less like the one you wrote about in your book and more like the one you talked about with such compassionate candour.

Notes

1. E. M. Pomeroy, "Sir Charles G. D. Roberts: Final Chapter," *The Canadian Author and Bookman* 20. 2 (1944): 6. [\[back\]](#)
2. Charles G. D. Roberts, "The Winged Scourge of the Dark," *Wisdom of the Wilderness* (London and Toronto: Dent, 1922) 107. [\[back\]](#)
3. Charles G. D. Roberts, "Colour Toasts," *The Collected Poems of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts*, ed. Desmond Pacey and Graham Adams (Wolfville: Wombat, 1985) 347. Roberts told Elsie that the toast in honour of "the girl who dresses in black" was written for her after she heeded his advice to wear black because it was becoming to her. [\[back\]](#)
4. E. M. Pomeroy, *Sir Charles G. D. Roberts: A Biography*

- (Toronto: Ryerson, 1943) 104. [\[back\]](#)
5. Letter from Elsie Pomeroy to Lorne Pierce, 15 March 1936. Lorne Pierce Collection, Queen's University Archives. [\[back\]](#)
 6. Pomeroy to Pierce, 15 March 1936. [\[back\]](#)
 7. Letter from Elsie Pomeroy to Lorne Pierce, 1 November 1943. Lorne Pierce Collection, Queen's University Archives. [\[back\]](#)
 8. Pomeroy to Pierce, 15 March 1936. [\[back\]](#)
 9. Laurel Boone, ed., *Collected Letters of Sir Charles G. D. Roberts* (Fredericton: Goose Lane, 1989) 592. Roberts to Pierce, 3 June 1940. [\[back\]](#)
 10. Boone 592. [\[back\]](#)
 11. Pomeroy, *Sir Charles G. D. Roberts: "Acknowledgment"* iv. [\[back\]](#)
 12. Pomeroy, "Acknowledgment" 309. [\[back\]](#)
 13. Pomeroy, "Sir Charles G. D. Roberts: Final Chapter" 5. [\[back\]](#)
 14. Pomeroy to Pierce, 1 November 1943. [\[back\]](#)
 15. Pomeroy to Pierce, 1 November 1943.. [\[back\]](#)
 16. Charles Lynch, *You Can't Print THAT!: Memoirs of a Political Voyeur* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1983) 30. [\[back\]](#)
 17. Pomeroy, "Sir Charles G. D. Roberts: Final Chapter" 5. [\[back\]](#)
 18. Desmond Pacey, *Creative Writing In Canada* (Toronto: Ryerson, 1952) 43. [\[back\]](#)