

OBITUARIES

Henry Reed

WITH Louis MacNeice, Henry Reed was pre-eminent among the poets who wrote for radio in the great days of the BBC Third Programme. Yet, through a mingling of perfectionism and dilatoriness, his life as a poet remained unfulfilled.

Born in Birmingham, he was educated at King Edward VI School and later at Birmingham University. Here he was among a group of undergraduates who came under the stimulating influence of Louis MacNeice, then a young assistant lecturer in classics.

He took first-class honours in languages and literature, and later achieved his MA with a thesis on Thomas Hardy. He started work on a biography of Hardy, but this proved to be a millstone round his neck, and after nearly 20 years of tinkering, he abandoned it.

After some years as a literary journalist and critic, he was conscripted in 1941 into the Royal Army Ordnance Corps (an experience later recalled in his much-anthologised poem, "Naming of Parts").

Later he was transferred to Naval Intelligence at Bletchley until his demobilisation in 1945. A year later his poems were published under the title of *A Map of Verona*. They included, with "Naming of Parts" and two poems in similar vein, a number of personal poems that reflected his deep love of Italy and its enchanting small cities. In another group, "The Desert", he created images of distant lands and oceans. Four poems in "Tintagel" evoke the tragedy of Tristram and Isolde.

The publication of *A Map of Verona* immediately established Henry Reed's reputation as a poet; but apart from five poems (including "Naming of Parts") in *Lessons of the War*, 1970, no other volume of poems was published during his lifetime. After its first broadcast in 1958, a narrative poem, "The Auction Sale", was printed in *The Listener*.

In 1947 Henry Reed began his radio writing career with a two-hour version of *Moby Dick*, interspersed with reflective poems on the whiteness of the whale and the symbolism of whaling; and with the second of the three days' pursuit described by Ishmael in a verse intermezzo. In the same

year he wrote his first original work, "Pytheas", in verse, on the Greek traveller who sailed into the Atlantic in search of Ultima Thule.

His profound admiration for the Italian poet Leopardi was expressed in two superb verse-plays in sprung pentameters: "The Unblest", in 1949, summoning up the claustal atmosphere of the Palazzo Leopardi in Recanati, with the young poet half-blind and a hunchback, and the bigoted mother domineering over the family; followed in 1950 by "The Monument", in which Leopardi's brief success in Bologna is clouded by unrequited love, and he returns to Recanati and an early death.

"Return to Naples" (1950) is a lively yet moving record of a young Englishman's five visits, over 20 years, to a Neapolitan family (the father a passionate stamp-collector, the mother affectionately warm but equally passionate, beset with the cares of a growing family as Mussolini gains power). "The Streets of Pompeii", awarded an Italia Prize in 1951, opens with an evocation of its destruction, in a version of Leopardi's poem; followed by a chronicle, partly in verse, partly in dramatized sequences, of a day passed among the ruined buildings by a pair of young Italian lovers, a couple of Scottish archaeologists, a quartet of youthful English holiday-makers, and a Traveller who is the poet's *alter ego*.

Radio works on other Italian themes included "The Great Desire I had", which imagines Shakespeare visiting Mantua and the Gonzaga palace with a company of Italian players, and finding himself alone in a salon decorated with the sprawling Trojan frescoes of Giulio Romano; which Shakespeare later describes in *The Rape of Lucrece*. "Vincenzo", in 1950, presented the life of Vincenzo Gonzaga in a dramatised form within the framework of narration by the four women whom he had known

most intimately.

In these Italian pieces Henry Reed revealed his instinctive mastery of the art of radio. All his creative powers were brought into play. For he was not only a poet of great sensibility, he had also a lively sense of comedy and of the absurd, and a remarkable gift for dramatic invention. He could be extremely witty, both in his social life and in his radio writing; and the wit could overflow into satire and occasionally malice. Yet, though homosexual by nature, he had an extraordinary sympathy with women's most profound emotions, and could portray them with tenderness and understanding: as in a moving scene in "Vincenzo", where the Grand Duke Francesco di Medici and his mistress Bianca Cappello, lying on their death-bed together, will not renounce their love, though it will condemn them to eternal damnation.

There is no doubt that Henry Reed greatly enjoyed his 15 years as a writer for BBC Features Department. Though he preferred his club, the Savile, to the pubs adjacent to Broadcasting House, he found himself in an agreeable professional circle of Features producers, writers, composers, actors and technicians.

His scripts were rarely completed more than a day or two before rehearsals began, but he particularly relished the affectionate ease in which he was held by the group of players who usually formed the nucleus of his cast. As he usually attended all rehearsals, this affection was enhanced during the later stages of his radio career, when the poetic content of his work was gradually overtaken by the hilariously satirical.

One byproduct of his research into Hardy's life had been a *jeu d'esprit*, "A By-Election in the Nineties", based on material in the Dorchester local newspapers. Two years later he drew on his own experiences to chronicle the tribulations of a naive young biographer, Herbert Reeve, who is seeing information for the biogra-

phy of a famous novelist — "A Very Great Man Indeed" (1953). He collects a mass of contradictory impressions, his sources ranging from the Misses Burklely, spinsters residing in Shepherd Market, to the 12-tone composeress Hilda Tablet.

Mary O'Farrell's overwhelming performance as Hilda prompted a sequel, "The Private Life of Hilda Tablet", in which Reeve is browbeaten into switching the subject of his biography from the dead novelist to the exuberantly living composeress. Henry Reed later claimed that in this notable scene, for which Reeve is summoned to Hilda's bathroom, full frontal nudity was heard for the first time on radio, "the author being quite unaware what a trail he was blazing".

Marjorie Westbury's singing in the part of Hilda's Viennese companion, Elsa Strauss, inevitably inspired the creation of "Emily Butler", an all-female opera, in which Hilda's music was brilliantly "realised" by Donald Swann. Four more Tablet pieces followed, each prompted by some outstanding performance in its predecessor. By Third Programme standards, the series enjoyed immense popularity and *réclame*; and it is lamentable that BBC Enterprises never attempted to issue these or other Reed masterpieces as LPs.

Some time later, Third Programme planned a kind of festival in which Henry Reed's major works could be repeated; and an article in *Radio Times* summarised his achievements. But realising how many years had passed since he had published any poems, Henry Reed was so enraged that he vowed never to write for radio again; and didn't. Occasionally he translated and adapted the work of European dramatists, and there is little doubt that he continued to write poems. But for several years his health gradually deteriorated, and he never got around to completing a volume for publication. Literally no one knows what remains, either finished or abandoned. To sort out the chaos will be a major task.

Douglas Cleverdon

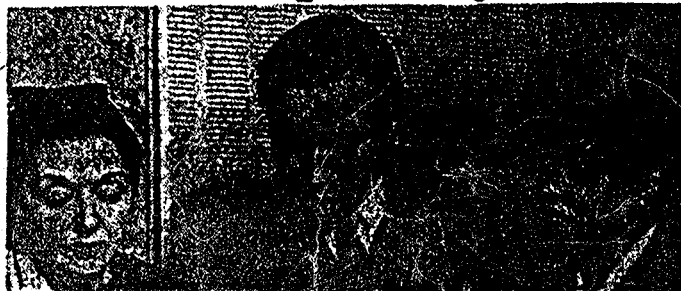
Henry Reed, born 22 February 1914, died 8 December 1986.

CLEVERDON

I DINED early with Christopher one evening at his flat in Eaton Square; we were surprised to find it was morning before we stopped talking and reading aloud. He walked across the road and we drank two bottles of milk which had been left for Lord Halifax. He is our neighbour in Yorkshire," Christopher said, "and won't mind."

That delight in talking with friends was never-ending, nor was a sense of boyish escapades. Those less robust were given

Christopher Sykes



tions. His interest in people was in their motives, their frustrations, their fears and their disguises.

I remember his being told one day that Bismarck's voice was surprisingly gentle, high-pitched and quiet. Christopher spent the next few hours reciting imaginary speeches of the Iron Chancellor giving advice to the young Kaiser. What was impressive was not so much the grotesque effect but the erudition and the vivid sense of actuality which this impromptu conveyed.