

Henry Reed

HENRY REED, who has died aged 72, was a distinguished poet, radio dramatist and critic.

When he was first called up into the Army in 1941, Reed wrote one of the best known of all the poems that emerged from the war, "The Naming of Parts," in which the soldier-poet's dreaming is counterpointed by a brilliant parody of the rifle instructor's patter.

In fact, though destined to be a PT Instructor, Reed was soon drafted into naval intelligence and later was concerned with "black" propaganda and the teaching of Japanese under the aegis of the Foreign Office.

The sense of irony that was present in so much of his work can be seen from the terse description of his wartime career "Who's Who": "Taught for a year before call-up in 1941; served (or rather studied) in Army 1941-42; transfer to Naval Intelligence, F.O. 1942-5; released V J Day, 1945; recalled to Army, 1945; did not go, 1945; matter silently dropped, 1945."

Immediately after the war he was one of two chosen for a special Society of Authors award, sponsored by a publisher, of £300 a year for three years in the hope that he would become a "distinguished writer".

In a way, he did, but perhaps not in the manner that the sponsors hoped. He turned to radio scriptwriting, making his name with a large-scale adaptation of "Moby Dick." This was followed by a large number of plays he either wrote or adapted and which were heard on the Third Programme.

In the 1950s he combined his radio work with translations, mostly from the Italian, for the London stage.

His name will be most associated with the anti-fascist playwright Ugo Betti and with the works of Natalia Ginzburg whose "The Advertisement", in a Reed translation, gave Joan Plowright one of her most demanding roles.

Witty best

In the early 1960s Reed was a regular book reviewer for The Sunday Telegraph, but steadily his output diminished and in the past 15 years he published very little and lived an almost reclusive life.

Reed was brought up in Birmingham where he attended the King Edward VI School, Aston, and the university there. At university he was one of the group of young writers who gathered round Louis MacNeice, then a young classics lecturer.

After leaving Birmingham Reed became a freelance journalist as a means of allowing himself as much time as possible for wandering around Europe and becoming a fluent linguist.

Later in his life Reed rather resented the success of "The Naming of Parts," which overshadowed his other poems, of which two volumes were published, and his radio plays which really showed him at his witty best. He had the rare distinction of having his radio plays published in two volumes in 1971.

He was unmarried.