

William Carlos Williams
Sept. 1883 – March 1963

William Carlos Williams was born September 17, 1883, in Rutherford, New Jersey. His father, William George, was British, choosing to remain a British citizen all his life and living very much in the role of a Victorian gentleman. He manufactured and distributed eau de cologne, which afforded lots of travel opportunities for his family as he often took them with him on his business trips, sometimes for months at a time. William's mother, known at home as Elena, was from the Caribbean islands; most of her family lived in Martinique and Puerto Rico. She was a mixture of French, Dutch, Spanish, and Jewish. From 1876 to 1879 she studied art in Paris; she treasured that experience, wishing for the rest of her life that she could return there to live.

William and Elena were married in Brooklyn in November of 1882 and set up their home in Rutherford. While the elder William considered himself a socialist, helping found the Unitarian Society of Rutherford, his wife's influence on their son was probably more profound. She chose to speak her native Spanish in the home, French when she could, and English only when absolutely required. She had no interest in provincialism and did not socialize readily with Rutherford citizens, but did often have friends and relatives from the Caribbean and from Paris in the house for long visits. It was his mother who took William and his brother, Edgar, abroad for a year in 1897, spending a good part of that time in Paris.

William and Edgar attended public schools in Rutherford until the year their mother took them abroad. During that trip they attended a private school in Switzerland as well as a French school in Paris. The Paris school experience proved a failure, as neither boy was fluent in French. Upon returning to the United States, William was sent to a private school in New York City. Here he was introduced to English traditional poetry, Walt Whitman being his favorite poet. It was this experience that led Williams to dedicate his life to poetry. Although he went on to study dentistry and finally medicine, he never gave up poetry. While in medical school at the University of Pennsylvania, Williams met Ezra Pound who introduced him to Hilda Doolittle. Although Williams and Pound had a rocky relationship at times, it was a friendship that lasted all of Williams' life. It was Pound's influence that shaped Williams' poetic direction, and while Pound's imagist period was of short duration, Williams is distinguished from other modernist poets of that time, because he never wavered in his attempts to create poetry free of all English conventions and purely American in its style.

When *The Complete Collected Poems of William Carlos Williams 1906-1938* was published in 1938, the poet was able to see the overall scope of his work, and decided he needed to make some changes in method and direction. While free verse had been the only possible answer to a uniquely American poetic style up to this point, Williams decided, upon viewing this volume, "Free verse was not the answer. From the beginning I knew that the American language must shape the pattern; later I rejected the word language and spoke of the American idiom—this was better than language, more identified with speech." (DLB 16, p.587) Deciding that his early poems were too conventional and orderly, he set out to complicate his style, experimenting with new stanza forms and his subject, identifying it from many angles now instead of only

from its singular physical existence. *Patterson* (1946-1958) probably best embraces William's expanded style.

Although William Carlos Williams' later years were impacted by a series of strokes that resulted in paralysis, he remained creative and had a following of aspiring poets seeking his advice and approval. Among them was Allen Ginsberg whose work impressed Williams enough for them to strike up a long-term friendship. Other poets influenced by Williams include Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, Cid Corman, and Denise Levertov, among many.

William Carlos Williams died March 4, 1963, in Rutherford, New Jersey. He had married, raised sons, established a medical practice, influenced modern poetry forever, and died, all in the same town where he was born. Later in 1963 he was posthumously awarded the Pulitzer Prize in poetry for *Pictures from Brueghel* (1962). Besides his poetry, Williams was also a prolific prose writer whose work included short stories, a trilogy of novels, a play, and his autobiography.

--L. Margaret Pomeroy

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