

# Poet Elizabeth Henley – A Brief Chronology

By John Van Fleet Henley

Elizabeth Artis Watts Henley was born in Bellingham, Washington on Sept. 25, 1912. She had two older sisters, Ruth Watts and Catharine Watts Stimpson, and a younger brother, Arthur Watts. As early as 7 years old, when she won a children's poetry contest, Elizabeth showed signs of her poetic gifts. One of the judges, who would befriend and encourage a very young Elizabeth, was Ella Higginson, the famous Northwest poet.

Elizabeth's father Arthur Watts, a prominent pioneer businessman in the Bellingham area, had an enthusiastic vision for the future of the Northwest. He insisted that not only his son, but all of his daughters, get higher education in an age when women were fresh in the halls of academe. He suffered a serious head injury during an industrial accident, which affected his physical and mental health. He took his own life around the time of the 1929 stock market crash, as did many other men. His suicide affected the family, and especially, perhaps profoundly, his daughter Elizabeth.

She had to leave the University of Washington to attend to the family and continue her schooling at Bellingham Normal School (now Western Washington State University – WWSU). In the early years of the Great Depression, Elizabeth began writing poetry professionally. She worked as poetry editor for *The Puget Sounder*.

Eventually, she returned to the University of Washington, where she studied under Vernon Lewis Parrington, author of the 3-volume masterpiece of American literary criticism, *Main Currents in American Thought*. She also met Oscar Winther and Sophus Winther, the latter reputedly active in the American Communist Party. Like many intellectuals of the age, Elizabeth had friends in the Lincoln Brigade, U.S. volunteers in the Spanish Civil War. She taught English from 1934 to 1940 at the University of Washington, receiving her Masters Degree in Spenserian studies.

During this time, Elizabeth befriended many interesting people, but one of particular interest. June Burn wrote *Living High*, an autobiography of mid-twentieth century, back-to-basics environmentalist thought. In fact, June Burn's cabin on the outskirts of old Bellingham has been virtually enshrined by WWSU's students and faculty. My mother happily recalled getting a call from Eleanor Roosevelt exhorting her, "Please, tell June Burn to call the White House to confer with Mrs. Roosevelt." June Burn believed in the simple life, owning virtually no technology. Most folks considered Burn to be, at best, a Bohemian, or at worst, a crackpot. Elizabeth considered June a good friend.

In 1940, Elizabeth met Preston Henley, who had come to the University of Washington to study business. They were married in 1941 and Elizabeth's eldest son, Preston Edward Van Fleet Henley, was



born. They moved to New York City and enjoyed a happy married life until December 7th of that year. Her husband joined the U.S. Navy and worked in Naval Intelligence during World War II. Elizabeth's second son Stephen Watts Henley was born in 1942. From 1943-1944, she taught at Hunter College High School. Always interested in regional history, she helped John Vroman research his books on the history of upstate New York.

After the war, she moved with her family to Boise, Idaho, where they remained until 1950. Maude Belden Watts, her mother, died in that year.

In 1951, the family moved to Portland, Oregon, and she gave birth to yours truly, John Van Fleet Henley. Between 1953 and 1957, she taught at Portland State College, becoming friends with many of the Oregon poets of the day, including Ethel Romig Fuller, Willis Eberman, William Stafford and Vi Gale, to name but a few. Her poetry appeared with greater frequency in reviews and well-known national magazines, including *The New Yorker*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, *Poetry Magazine* and *McCalls*.

In 1956, she and her husband were divorced. Extremely sensitive, she could be excessive in expression of that sensitivity. Oregon's 1950s-era custody courts probably viewed a woman who professed to be a poet as totally mad. And while she had never been a communist, the Canwell investigation for the House Un-American Affairs Committee "smoked out" a number of communists at the University of Washington where she had taught. She left Portland and stayed in Salem. Her husband was given custody of the children.



In 1959, Elizabeth started teaching at Oregon State College, which became Oregon State University shortly thereafter. Her years at Oregon State encompassed her most prolific period of writing. Indeed, the largest body of her best-known work was produced in Oregon.

Elizabeth never felt at home in Oregon, and often said that she was in exile in this state. Unlike New York, Oregonians did not easily embrace intellectuals and poets. She also bore considerable resentment against Oregon State, which paid her 15% less than a male professor made for the same workload. Being divorced, she was also subject to considerable sexual harassment from men teaching at OSU and had little recourse for protecting herself. The laws about such behavior would not come into existence until years after she had retired. Overworked and underpaid, she never was able to regain custody of her children.

For her temperament, the village doctor (male) gave her Percodan, also known as housewife heroin. This proved of little help in controlling her temperament. In fact, it resulted in quite the opposite. In 1968, Elizabeth fell and was injured. This same physician did a cursory job of examining the injury and diagnosed it as a broken leg. She had, in fact, broken her spine as well. She bravely limped to her classrooms at OSU each day and then would go home to continue her work in loneliness. She retired from OSU in 1975.

She loved teaching and lived for it, her students loving her and she adoring them. She organized the first Oregon syllabus for children's literature and taught that children's books were not just genre writing, but part of literature as a whole. Many of the themes for the mainstream novels she read and taught were in the storybooks and classics of children's literature, especially in mythology and fairy tales.

The influences on her work and intellectual life were many and various. Early in her life, she adored the poetry of Millay, Yeats, Rupert Brooke, A.E. Housman, William Shakespeare – especially *The Tempest* – and Walt Whitman. In her most prolific period, she adored William Faulkner, Nikos Kazantzakis, and the critic Northrup Frye, whom she considered to be the last word on criticism. She

knew much of Frazier's *The Golden Bough* by heart. She would have enjoyed the works of Carl Jung had she not been given to mistrust everyone associated with the psychoanalytic trade.

Elizabeth spent the last years of her life writing on the works of the English poet and novelist, Walter de la Mare. Her unfinished manuscript on de la Mare, and the rest of her archive will soon reside at Western Washington State University in Bellingham, honoring one of her last requests.

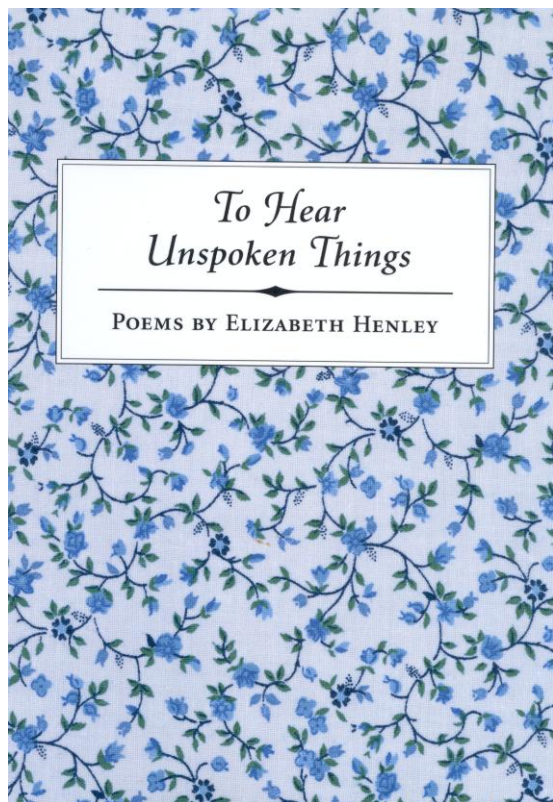
On Christmas of 1980, her health deteriorated rapidly, and her eldest son Preston quit work to take care of her. She died in January of 1981, her injured spine having basically become so bad that she suffocated in her son John's arms. Her last words were: "I have three fine sons."

From her gravesite one can see Bellingham Bay to the west, Mt. Baker looming to the east, and the great Northwest rain forest stretching to the horizon. Δ

## *To Hear Unspoken Things*

Excerpt from the Foreword by  
**Catharine R. Stimpson**

**T**wo feelings sweep and run through the poems about childhood and the early history of Anglo Northwest. One is a subtle, haunting melancholy. The melancholy of childhood is having to grow up: to leave behind "sweet childhood," endure "awful" puberty, and shoulder the burdens of adulthood. Paradoxically, the sweeter a childhood, the sadder it is, because the loss of a happy childhood is far more



difficult to bear than the loss of an unhappy one. The melancholy of the Pacific Northwest lies not only in the sacrifices of the pioneers, especially of the pioneer women, but also in the particular nature of its maturing. For builders have tamed nature's freshness and vitality. In the name of progress, they have laid streets of "pavement and brick" down over earth and water and Indian trails. Memory, be it of childhood or of history, can be a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it can cut through time and bring back images and emotions of the past. On the other hand, in doing so, it reminds us of what we have palpably lost.

The second feeling is sheer delight in nature, its mystery and magic, its delicacy and density, its sheer burgeoning beauty. Henley is a poet of sunsets and stars, spume and salt winds, forests and fields, the channels and currents among the islands of Puget Sound. Her finest poems erase the borders between the self and nature, perception and dream, time and the timeless. The metaphor to which she turns again and again to symbolize a life-giving civilization is that of the cultivation of flowers, especially roses and lilacs. For flowers, and the gardens they help to compose, nurture a connection between nature and human nature. In contrast, paved streets conquer nature. Δ

## Shortcut Through the Pasture

There is only one way to enter the pasture lot;  
There is no gate, for there is no fence of stone.  
There is no one to ask, but the truth of things makes known  
If a boy may come there to walk, if a boy can not.

There is only one way to walk — if he comes at all.  
Careful and quiet here, and alone, and alone.  
It is by the path that the regular wind has blown  
That has the earth for a floor and fern for a wall.

He must be small in spirit as never before,  
Seeing what spiders see in the spires of grass;  
Gliding as serpent, a ripple of dark he may pass  
In the canyon that admits him and no more,

Where the tangle and briar turn green, hearing the rise  
And throb of fluids through distending vein  
As God Incarnate comes from the earth again,  
Astounding the serpent's blood and the spider's eyes.

As from all forgotten and vacant land  
He must return. In the day or the dark  
He will hear unspoken things, will hark:  
Will see small things, and understand.

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Selected Readings from Elizabeth Henley's Book

## *To Hear Unspoken Things*

Press-22 Portland, Oregon 2000

Noon **November 14, 2000** U.S. Bank Room (1<sup>st</sup> Floor)

Multnomah County Library 801 SW 10<sup>th</sup> Avenue Portland

Presenters:

**Ellen Watts Lodine** — Elizabeth's niece, editor of *To Hear Unspoken Things*

**John Van Fleet Henley** — Elizabeth's son, bookman at Great Northwest Bookstore

**Jane Glazer** — Poet, author of *Some Trick of Light*

**Leanne Grabel** — Poet of Café Lena fame, author of *Short Poems by a Short Person*

**John Haislip** — Poet, 1<sup>st</sup> Hazel Hall Award winner for *Seal Rock*, OSU colleague of Elizabeth Henley

**Walt Curtis** — Poet, Stewart Holbrook Award winner, author of *Rhymes for Alice Blue Light*

**David Hedges** — Poet, Oregon State Poetry Association President, author of *The Wild Bunch*



Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission, PO Box 3588, Portland, OR 97208-3588

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