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Kenneth (Lewis) Roberts

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About this Person

Born: December 08, 1885 in Kennebunk, Maine, United States

Died: July 21, 1957 in Kennebunkport, Maine, United States

Nationality: American

Occupation: Writer

Other Names: Roberts, Kenneth Lewis (American writer)

Updated: June 17, 2002

PERSONAL INFORMATION:

Family: Born December 8, 1885, in Kennebunk, ME; died July 21, 1957, in Kennebunkport, ME; son of Frank Lewis and Grace (Tibbets) Roberts; married Anna Seiberling Mosser, 1911. Education: Cornell University, A.B., 1908.

CAREER:

Novelist, journalist, autobiographer, dramatist, editor, and translator. *Boston Post*, reporter and columnist, 1909-18 and editor of its *Sunday Post* humor page, 1915-18; *Life*, editorial staff member, 1915-18; *Saturday Evening Post*, correspondent in Washington, DC and Europe, 1919-28. *Military service:* United States Army, captain in the intelligence section of the Siberian Expeditionary Force, 1918-19.

AWARDS:

D. Litt. from Dartmouth College, 1934, Colby College, 1935, Bowdoin College, 1937, Middlebury College, 1938, and Northwestern University, 1945; Special Pulitzer Prize, 1957.

WORKS:

WRITINGS BY THE AUTHOR:

- *Europe's Morning After*, Harper (New York, NY), 1921.
- *Why Europe Leaves Home*, Bobbs-Merrill (Indianapolis, IN), 1922.
- *Sun Hunting: Adventures and Observations among the Native and Migratory Tribes of Florida, Including the Stoical Time-Killers of Palm Beach, the Gentle and Gregarious Tin-Canners of the Remote Interior, and the Vivacious and Semi-Violent Peoples of Miami and Its Pulieus*, Bobbs-Merrill (Indianapolis, IN), 1922.
- (With Booth Tarkington and Hugh McNair Kahler; as Cornelius Obenchain Van Loot) *The Collector's Whatnot*, Houghton Mifflin (Boston, MA and New York, NY), 1923.
- *Black Magic*, Bobbs-Merrill (Indianapolis, IN), 1924.
- *Concentrated New England: A Sketch of Calvin Coolidge*, Bobbs-Merrill (Indianapolis, IN), 1924.
- *Florida Loafing*, Bobbs-Merrill (Indianapolis, IN), 1925.
- *Florida*, Harper (New York, NY), 1926.
- *Antiquamania*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1928.
- *Arundel*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1930, revised edition, 1933, third revised edition, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1956.
- *The Lively Lady*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1931, revised edition, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1935.
- *Rabble in Arms, A Chronicle of Arundel and the Burgoyne Invasion*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1933, revised edition, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1947.
- *Captain Caution*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1934.
- (With Robert Garland) *The Brotherhood of Man: A Drama in One Act*, French (New York, NY), 1934.

- *For Authors Only, and Other Gloomy Essays*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1935.
- *It Must Be Your Tonsils*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1936.
- *Northwest Passage*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1937.
- *Trending into Maine*, Little, Brown (Boston, MA), 1938, enlarged edition, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1944.
- *Oliver Wiswell*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1940.
- *The Kenneth Roberts Reader*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1945.
- *Lydia Bailey*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1947.
- *I Wanted to Write*, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1949.
- *Henry Gross and His Dowsing Rod*, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1951.
- *Don't Say That about Maine!*, 1951.
- *The Seventh Sense*, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1953.
- *Boon Island*, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1956.
- *Water Unlimited*, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1957.
- *The Battle of Cowpens: The Great Morale Builder*, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1958.

OTHER

- (Compiler and annotator) *March to Québec: Journals of the Members of Arnold's Expedition*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1938, second enlarged edition, Doubleday (Garden City, NY), 1953.
- (Author of introduction and notes) Marjorie Mosser, *Good Maine Food*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1939.
- (Editor and translator, with wife Anna M. Roberts) *Moreau de St. Méry's American Journey (1793-1798)*, Doubleday, Doran (Garden City, NY), 1947.

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS:

Northwest Passage was adapted for film twice, once in 1940, and the second time, under the title *Mission of Danger*, in 1959.

Sidelights

Kenneth Roberts is best known for his eight historical novels, particularly *Northwest Passage* and the "Chronicles of Arundel" series. Roberts, however, wrote and edited for many years for several major publications and his oeuvre contains much more nonfiction than fiction. After working briefly in the leather business from 1908 to 1909, he began his literary career as a journalist for the *Boston Post* and the *Saturday Evening Post* and continued to publish articles and other nonfiction until his death. His nonfiction works covered a broad range of subjects, from the states of Florida and Maine to hobbies such as antique collecting and water dowsing. Roberts received a special Pulitzer Prize in 1957, the year he died, for generating interest in American history. His most popular work by far, *Northwest Passage*, inspired two film adaptations, *Northwest Passage* and *Mission of Danger*. Overall, he published almost twenty nonfiction books and two plays, and worked as an editor and translator.

Roberts gathered many of his *Saturday Evening Post* articles into book-length collections, including three books about Florida, *Sun Hunting: Adventures and Observations among the Native and Migratory Tribes of Florida, Including the Stoical Time-Killers of Palm Beach, the Gentle and Gregarious Tin-Canners of the Remote Interior, and the Vivacious and Semi-Violent Peoples of Miami and Its Pulieus, Florida Loafing, and Florida*.

Roberts's fascination with Florida matched his passion for his native Maine. Though he spent alternating seasons in Italy after 1928, Roberts remained closely tied to his home state; his family lived there for several generations and had been among Maine's pioneers and soldiers. His fondness for the state was "a constant force in his life," wrote Herbert Faulkner West in an article in *Colby Library Quarterly*. His popular series of books called the "Chronicles of Arundel" is set in the area, Arundel being an earlier name of Roberts's birthplace, Kennebunk, Maine. He also wrote two nonfiction books on the state, *Trending into Maine* and *Don't Say That about Maine!*. The essays in *Trending into Maine* examine cultural influences such as fishing, shipbuilding, hunting, and Maine cookery. The book proved popular and in 1944, six years after its original publication, Roberts revised and re-released it. Some reviewers, such as Burton Rascoe, found Roberts' talents better suited for this kind of work. Rascoe commented on *Trending into Maine* for *Newsweek*: "I like Roberts best when he is writing nonfiction. I have been absorbed by every word of *Trending into Maine*. . . . One chapter is called: 'Maine Stories I'd Like to Write'. . . . *Trending into Maine* is, I want to tell you, far more in entertainment and information value than you have any right to expect out of 30-odd works of historical fiction, including all of Roberts'." *Don't Say That about Maine!* is often omitted in lists of Roberts' principal works. In 1939, Roberts again indulged his passion for the state by writing the introduction and notes for a cookbook authored by his niece, Marjorie Mosser. *Good Maine Food* has been reprinted many times since its original publication in 1939 and contains traditional Maine recipes and anecdotes about the region.

Roberts also wrote three books on the superstitious subject of water dowsing, which a friend, Henry Gross, introduced him to. Dowsing is the practice of locating underground water sources with a divining rod. According to his autobiography, *I Wanted to Write*, Roberts sincerely believed dowsing could answer the world's fresh water supply needs. But after he published *Henry Gross and His Dowsing Rod, The Seventh Sense, and Water Unlimited*, West questioned his judgment, writing in the *Colby Library Quarterly*, "Perhaps the less said the better about his period of defending the work of his friend, Henry Gross, in the use of the dowsing rod, though it does show his passion for justice and truth as he saw it. . . . With an intensity perhaps greater than the necessity, he defended against scientists and other experts 'the working of the dowsing rod.'"

Roberts admired Benito Mussolini for bringing order to a chaotic society. But *Black Magic*, which celebrates Italian fascism, also made him a target for critics. West called the novel "a plea for conservatism" and described it as "an account of the benefits Roberts

thought Mussolini brought to Italy and of the perverse qualities of the Nazi dictatorship then showing its power in Bavaria." However, according to Philip C. Monahan in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, "Roberts later reversed this opinion."

Roberts also published two books on antique collecting, *The Collector's Whatnot* and *Antiquamania*. Writing under the pseudonym Cornelius Obenchain Van Loot, Roberts collaborated with friend and fellow Maine resident Booth Tarkington and with Hugh McNair Kahler on *The Collector's Whatnot*, a humorous manual for antique collectors.

As Orville Prescott described in the *Yale Review*, "Kenneth Roberts is a big, hearty, vital, opinionated, hasty-tempered man. He hates politicians, hypocrisy, corruption, cowardice, and tyranny. He loves food, action, valor, independence, and the very stuff of history itself. All this is plain as a pikestaff in his books." Much has been written on his historical novels, such as *Arundel*, *Northwest Passage*, and *Boon Island*, and his fiction has been the subject of some critical studies. He is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

FURTHER READINGS:

FURTHER READINGS ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

BOOKS

- *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 9: *American Novelists, 1910-1945*, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1981.
- *Modern American Literature*, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1999.
- *Reference Guide to American Literature*, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1994.
- *Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, Volume 23, Gale (Detroit, MI), 1987.
- *Twentieth-Century Romance and Historical Writers*, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1994.

PERIODICALS

- *Colby Library Quarterly*, September, 1962, Herbert Faulkner West, "The Works of Kenneth Roberts," pp. 89-99.
- *Newsweek*, June 20, 1938, Burton Rascoe, review of *Trending into Maine*, p. 31.
- *Yale Review*, spring, 1947, p. 573.*

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