

## ANALYSIS

*The Great Meadow* (1930)



Elizabeth Madox Roberts

(1886-1941)

"[*My Heart and My Flesh*] was much too 'unpleasant' a book to achieve the popularity in store for *The Great Meadow*, which is generally regarded as one of the finest historical novels of our time. In *The Great Meadow* Miss Roberts did not shy at traditional themes: there is an Indian raid; Daniel Boone is a character; there is even an Enoch Arden situation. But she never concerned herself with the accumulation of historical detail, for she wrote the historical novel as if it were poetry, with Berkeleian idealism and the pioneering spirit so curiously blended that it was difficult to tell where one ended and the other began. To Diony there is no being for the world without a mind to know it.... At the end of the book, Miss Roberts relates her tale to its historical background by ending the war and resolving the domestic situation at the same moment: 'For a little while...[Diony] felt that the end of an age had come to the world, a new order dawning out of the chaos that had beat through the house during the early part of the night.'

But if *The Great Meadow* is Elizabeth Madox Roberts's most completely wrought and thoroughly satisfying novel, the much more difficult *He Sent Forth a Raven* (which, as Grant Knight has pointed out, was influenced by her admiration for *Wuthering Heights*), is larger in conception and reveals more of her spirit. The characters, too, have a larger purchase upon the imagination."

Edward Wagenknecht  
*Cavalcade of the American Novel*  
(Holt 1952) 391-92

"Although *The Great Meadow* was Miss Roberts' fourth novel in order of publication, it has been reported that she first conceived of the book as far back as 1915, before she went to Chicago. It certainly seems to be the one of all her novels which allowed her to move most freely among the materials and techniques she knew best. The background is the late eighteenth-century settlement of Kentucky, and the people are such as she imagined her own pioneer ancestors to be. Further, the chronicle of a people's conquest of the wilderness lends itself to a symbolic mergence with one her major themes--the individual's creation of order out of the chaos of sensations. And Miss Roberts' concept of communality, nurtured on the ideals of Jeffersonian democracy, could here find illustration in the people's creation of a national life--

the social level of meaning which parallels symbolically the life-creating activities of the book's heroine, Diony. The result, *The Great Meadow*, has been the most highly regarded of all Miss Roberts' novels.

In *The Time of Man* we noted that the structural rhythm of that novel was drawn from the unending struggle of man, each day fighting a new battle, retiring at nightfall stronger inwardly with the fruits of the day's victory, but forced to face another battle on the morrow. We saw that the heroic qualities of man, for Miss Roberts, lay in the dignity and courage and self-faith with which man faced his battles. In *My Heart and My Flesh* the same onward-going ebb-and-flow rhythm was applied to Theodosia's agonizing descent into herself in order to discover that self, followed by the slow blossoming of the self made whole and realized. The same rhythm, but this time applied to the spiritual death and rebirth of the central character, Ellen's story having been one of continuing growth.

In *The Great Meadow* there are two major movements, the cumulative growth of Diony as she imposes order on the world within her, and the westward march of the colonies creating order and civilization in the untamed wilderness. Both movements are characterized symbolically in the novel with images of birth and begetting--variations, as we can see, of this same undulating flux which inches forward toward an eternally receding goal. The two movements do not operate completely on parallel planes, however; they interact symbolically and sometimes fuse. At times Diony becomes a brooding mother symbol of America, and the American experience of frontier expansion becomes a symbol of the individual's lonely struggle with the elements beyond his soul.

The novel opens with Diony, sixteen years old, in the home of her father in Albemarle County, Virginia. The year is 1774. From her father's family, Diony has the heritage of the tidewater gentry; her mother was a Pennsylvania Methodist; hence Diony is born with the mixture of blood and backgrounds which Miss Roberts felt to be representative of those late eighteenth-century pioneers who settled Kentucky.... Five Oaks, the Hall homestead, is on the outer fringes of the frontier, geographically situated at the point where order and chaos impinge on one another... But not only is Diony at the geographical juncture of chaos and order; within her own sixteen-year-old experience are conjoined the wilderness and civilization. Through her father's old letters and his reminiscent talk, she is able to recreate the life of the tidewater in her memory so vividly that it becomes a real experience for her, and she is able to visualize the life of brocaded gowns and powdered pompadours for her younger sister, Betty.

Her early exposure to Berkeley has made her highly sensitive to the existence of unordered infinity, of chaos unsubdued by mind; and Sallie Tolliver, a woman on whom the wilderness has laid its inexorable hand, moves like a stricken wraith through the Hall household. Significantly, Miss Roberts compares Diony with Ellen Chesser: 'Ellen is more a creature of the ground. Diony is a creature of the mind, moving always more inwardly.' *The Time of Man* opened with Ellen Chesser spontaneously asserting her identity by writing her name in the air with her finger; *The Great Meadow* opens with Diony introspectively deducing the existence of the world itself from her own self-awareness: 'The world reached straight then, into infinity, laid out beyond the level of herself in a far-going horizontal, although report said of it that it bent to a round and made a globe. She was aware of infinity outward going and never returning. "I, Diony," she said.'

In *The Time of Man*, the narrative point of view was so thoroughly restricted to the consciousness of Ellen Chesser (who was not, as Miss Roberts pointed out, an 'analytical' creature), that hers was the only consciousness that was realized. In that novel, this was not at all a fault; it was in fact a tour de force. In *My Heart and My Flesh*, however, we noted that the characters subordinate to Theodosia Bell were too shadowy to convince; because of the surrealistic pitch of the novel, this was not as serious a flaw as it might have been, but it seemed to limit Miss Roberts to the creation of one character per novel. Here, in *The Great Meadow*, there is a distinct advance in the rendering of subordinate characters--an advance facilitated largely by the greater lucidity of Diony's perceptions of human contacts, and a more sophisticated employment of dialog to reveal character. Such subordinate characters as Thomas and Betty Hall, Berk and Elvira Jarvis, and Daniel Boone, emerge in sharper outline than we might have expected, without a corresponding loss in the subjective perceptions of the main character.

Moreover, because Diony is a 'creature of the mind,' she is consciously motivated to impose form on chaos: 'Her thought leaped then beyond articulation and settled to a vast passion of mental desire. Oh, to create rivers by knowing rivers, to move outward through the extended infinite plane until it assumed roundness. Oh, to make a world out of chaos.' This conscious desire to subdue the infinities of chaos into finite knowable order makes Diony a fitting symbol for the American frontier experience; that is, she can be both pioneer and pioneering.

Reports of the 'promise land' which lies beyond almost inaccessible mountains, this 'well-nigh sort of Eden...Caintuck,' are brought into the Hall household. The grandeur of the vast, rich-flowing caneland, the seven beautiful rivers with the wonderful names that rill on the tongue, and the legendary, woodcock with the ivory beak, create an image of Paradise: 'Rich cane. Trees all in bloweth in the spring o'-the year. Like paradise it is, so beautiful and good.' The way was long and the ordeal of settlement beset with dangers that the mind could not even imagine. But once the unknown is defined and circumscribed by the known, it exerts a powerful attraction on the human spirit, and this insatiable urge to extend experience is integral to Miss Roberts' concept of human growth.

The frontiersmen in Albemarle County react instinctively to the challenge of the unsubdued West. Man cannot forage into the unknown without himself being changed, but because man has instinctive faith in the virtue of knowledge--Miss Roberts believed--he assumes that this change will be for the better. To experience suffering, to impart a design on that which is without design, in short, to 'know' in the dynamic, cumulative, creative sense which Miss Roberts pours into this all-important verb, is the one vital 'good' in human life. Thus, the settlement of the original thirteen colonies, the belief of the early Puritans in their divine commission to create a 'New Jerusalem' in the wilderness, the establishment of a Federal Republic of the United States of America, are, for Miss Roberts, almost poems--group manifestations of the same urge that impels Diony 'to create rivers by knowing rivers.... Oh, to make a world out of chaos.' And thus, as the Halls sit by their fireside in the ordered security of Five Oaks, they dream of the untouched land beyond the mountains: 'Such a country would breed up a race of heroes, men built and knitted together to endure.' One further element should be added here. Diony is not only self-conscious--'a creature of the mind'--but she is also vaguely aware of her destiny as a symbol.... Uranus and Gaea conquered Chaos in their symbolic wedding which parallels the creation of the universe. Diony, then, in rough parallelism, stands for man subduing nature. Or, as Miss Roberts points out in her notes: 'Nature arising above the infinities of matter, above the indefinite and everlasting fixity of matter with its 'chemistry.' Man then arising above Nature.'

Miss Roberts, thus, very early in the novel, suggests quite explicitly the symbolic direction which the novel will take. So Diony rejects the suitor who brings a promise of elegance and a secure future.... And she accepts the proposal of Berk Jarvis to come with him to Harrodstown, the new settlement at the end of Boone's Wilderness Road: 'They would go to the country behind the mountains and start a new world there, he said.' Spasmodic reports of fighting in Boston, the sitting of the Continental Congress, and the signing of the Declaration of Independence sift gradually into Five Oaks, infusing Berk's 'to start a new world' with a continental significance.

As the preparations for the movement westward are completed and the marriage takes place, Thomas Hall acts as chorus, interpreting the dramatic activity at Five Oaks in relation to the immutable principles of life.... The law of nature, as Thomas Hall understands it, is that of continual cumulative progress through constant rebirths; the daughter must leave the father, childhood must give way to maturity, naissance must be followed by renaissance. And returning us to the theme of *The Time of Man*, Thomas Hall intones the first verses of the *Aeneid*.... The journey of Diony is thus invested with the significance of that other journey to found a nation, and the symbolic reach of the action ascends into the epic plane.

The marriage ceremony itself, performed under Methodist auspices in a county where only Church of England marriages were legal before the Declaration of Independence, is an emblem of defiance to the old way and a revolutionary adoption of the new, as the murmurs of dissatisfaction among the wedding guests testify.... And thus, Diony, carrying the heritage of all her forebears, yearning to create something new of her own, moves forward into the unknown....

The travail of the five-hundred-mile trek from Five Oaks to Fort Harrod--the long journey along the valley of the Shenandoah, the crossing of the New River at Inglis Ferry, the repeated crossings of the Holston and the Clinch rivers, the laborious march over Powell Mountain--culminates symbolically not in the arrival at Fort Harrod but in the dramatic passage through the gap in the great cliff barrier which guards Kentucky from the outside world. The land itself is portrayed in the act of giving birth to a new people; the long period of gestation, the laborious passage through the mountains, and the miraculous ejection of new life are implicit in the description of the long journey.... And when the marchers near Harrod's fort, they have the glow and wonder of the newborn upon them; indeed, the connotations of the birth are somewhat Wordsworthian.... And thus, through a remarkable interfusion of symbolism (the coupling of the Declaration of Independence with the migration 'to start a new world'), the birth of a nation and the birth out of a nation become dramatically realized at one and the same time.

In the significant meeting between Diony and Daniel Boone, when Diony thanks Boone for making the road through the wilderness over which she has traveled, Boone's answer reasserts Miss Roberts' belief in the creative base of individual experience: 'You're right welcome to it,' Boone said. 'If I marked out the way, you had to go it with your two feet, and so the road's yours too for the trouble you took to walk it. And the danger was yours whilst you went the way.' Thus the pilgrimage of man is everyman's, and no matter how many have gone before, the path is always new, dangerous, and self-created. The further conversation between Diony and Boone illuminates the contrast between the two kinds of strength which human beings possess: 'the man's strength being in the thrust, the drive, in action, the woman's lateral, in the plane, enduring, inactive but constant.' Diony suggests to Boone that there are many places in Kentucky where 'a body could get lost in and never find himself again.' Boone's reply is significant: 'I don't reckon I'd ever get lost in e'er one. Not to say lost. I never was lost. I was bewildered right bad once for as much as a week, but not lost. I never felt lost the whole enduren time.' Later Diony reflects on this answer.... 'I'm not the Boone kind,' she said. 'I never was.... I'd be more at home somewheres else.... I don't know where.'

The distinction is an important one for Miss Roberts' concept of ordering chaos; the one strength, the Boone strength, is that which leaps outward into the unknown, blazing the pioneer trail into the wilderness without substantially altering the wilderness. The Diony kind of strength, on the other hand, is that which follows the trail after it is blazed, setting things in order, establishing a routine and a familiarity in the areas barely wrested out of the grip of chaos. This strength Miss Roberts generally thinks of as a female strength; the first is more closely associated with the physical, but the second is mental. The strengths are, of course, complementary, and each is an application of the 'life is from within' principle.

Miss Roberts evidently became aware that the kind of intuitive ordering of experience which we saw so beautifully illustrated in *The Time of Man* was not a sufficient concept to explain the workings of social groups; accordingly, we see her supplying a complementary kind of idea to encompass all the activities by which progress is made. Under the Boone kind of man, we can include the explorer, the brilliant theorist, the visionary artist, and similar people who push out the frontiers of human knowledge; the Diony kind then follows the path streaked erratically on the outermost edge of the horizon, absorbing and ordering the new territory into the settle possession of mankind.... In Boone alone we had a symbol of man leaping apart from men, thrusting forward to a lonely and hazardous freedom among the natural and chaotic things of the unmapped earth'....

With the impetus of this additional concept, the symbolic connotations of the novel expand to a higher, more universal plane, and we find that *The Great Meadow* is at once a chronicle of Diony's every-increasing personality, a narrative which catches the distilled meaning of the American experience, and a symbolic affirmation and analysis of the progress of mankind. This becomes explicit in the long dream of a 'civil society' which Diony projects, sitting alone in a cabin in Fort Harrod in 1778. She realizes that her 'new birth' is merely one of endless births which she must undergo in her insistence to remain alive--that 'she was beginning before the beginning.' And in the implications of the dream, we see that she realizes that mankind, striving to advance into uncharted areas, must likewise be prepared to undergo an endless series of new beginnings. In her dream, 'the wearying infinitives of the wilderness come to an end.' Stone walls and rail fences set bounds to the land, and people live, not isolated, but close to neighbors, with whom they can share skills and friendship. One swift paragraph capsules in metaphor the entire vision of mankind, the Boone kind and the Diony kind, carving a civilization out of disorder....

'Bees, then, in hives set in neat rows near a dwelling. They gather sweet from the wild growth in the uncleared places and from the pollen of the corn, from the white clover. It would be a civil picture, the hives cut out of well-sawed logs and left to their own devices until the honey made a rich, sweet fatness within. Then a man, Berk Jarvis perhaps, goes among the hives and robs the bees of their harvest, and a woman, herself, Diony, stores the honey in earthen jars of which there would be a plenty.'

And then, significantly, since for Miss Roberts 'the sovereign part of man is his mind,' and Diony is 'a creature of mind,' the last crowning image of the dream is as follows: 'Books stand in a row on a shelf where a narrow beam of light falls through a high casement over a desk where one might rest a volume, where one might sit for an hour and search the terrible pages, looking for beauty, looking for some final true way of life. In them, the books, Man walks slowly down through the centuries, walking on the stairs of the years.'

Both the birth and the progress motifs are reiterated with the birth of Tom Jarvis to Diony, which records at once an ending to the old way and the beginning of a new phase of Diony's growth. In parallel with the birth of Tom, the symbolic overtones of the following passage focus on Diony's intense participation in nature, and delicately suggest the interpenetration of man and nature: 'The birds had come back from wherever they had been... Oh, it was a new day in a new world...'. This passage marks Diony's leap into a new self-realization and a reaffirmation of life--both hers and the new life she has borne. Nature, itself, seems to be at one with itself, and it too gives the impression of being on the brink of new creative adventures.

But when Diony has come to believe the persistent reports of Berk's death in the wilderness, in a climactic scene she wanders outside the stockade and spends the night with the wind of the wilderness laying its alien touch upon her: 'The land reached away beyond her knowledge and beyond her power to imagine it. The infinitives of life, beetles and owls and animals, leaves and throbbing trees, endlessly growing oppressed her, and she was afraid, less of the wolf-cries toward the south than of the indefinite earth.' And as the night draws on, her awareness of her position in the universe becomes crystallized to a small and lucid point: 'She sat for some time on a log... The indefiniteness of the outside earth, beyond herself, became a terror.'

Again, as in the earlier description of spring, nature offers correspondences which may serve as a source of self-knowledge to the creative spirit, and when Diony returns to the stockade in the morning, we are elliptically told: 'No one offered comment on her passing and none knew what way she had been or how far she had gone.' However, it is clear that this episode is similar to Theodosia Bell's descent into hell; Diony, shaving her life down to 'a minute point,' on the very edge of surrender to the chaos around her, does not become 'lost' but finds within her the blind faith to continue life.

And in the final chapter, when Berk tells of his adventures among the Ojibway, we hear once again the theme of *The Time of Man* and *My Heart and My Flesh*. To the Indians who would have eaten his flesh to gain his strength, Berk's speech says that the strength is from within, but it is not of the flesh. 'You put me in your kettle and you'll not eat one bite of my strength'....

The Enoch Arden situation at the end of *The Great Meadow*, when Berk returns to find Diony married to Evan Muir, is, I think, the one weakness in the novel. It is clear from Miss Roberts' journal notes that she planned it to serve as a resolution of her major themes--the founding of Harrodstown, the birth of the American republic, and Diony's realization of her strength and her limitations--limitations which could be supported by the complementary Boone strength of Berk Jarvis. Unfortunately, the distinction between Evan Muir and Berk Jarvis is not dramatically vivid enough to the reader to perceive immediately the significance of Diony's dilemma. In the novel, the difference between Evan Muir and Berk Jarvis is fuzzily realized. They are both strong men, brave and industrious; Berk is perhaps more reckless than Evan Muir. But, in her private notes, Miss Roberts is quite clear in distinction.... 'Berk represents art.... Evan Muir--A large strong industrious man... Domestic, quiet, easily predicted.'

With these notations as a clue, we can readily read back into the novel's examples of the differences between the two men: Berk's lonely pride and labor in the building of the house, his impulsive thirst for vengeance, his abrupt direct manner, and even his name, and on the other hand, the quiet, square domesticity and kindly, easygoing manner of Evan Muir. With this reconsideration, Miss Roberts' further note makes much more sense: 'Berk, the type of strong-hewed leader, swift in thought and wily, revengeful, a warrior, woodsman, hunter, tireless as the wolf. Large, strong, kind but relentless, driving Diony beyond herself, driving Man forward, thrust outward and forward through the trees and the stones.' But, if the realization of this distinction depends on Miss Roberts' journal notations--if the reader cannot feel within the novel itself that Diony's choice is a significant one, integral to the meaning of the novel--then the final episode has a note of contrived artificiality which mars the otherwise harmonious development of the themes.

In the last scene, as Diony sits alone in the house on Deer Creek, Miss Roberts ties together the major strands of the novel in Diony's reflections: 'For a little while she felt that the end of an age had come to the world, a new order dawning out of the chaos... Boone, she contrived, was a messenger to the chaotic part, a herald, an envoy there, to prepare it for civil men.' And thus, the creation of order out of chaos, the thrusting forward of man into areas unknown that he may impose a form upon them, and the kind of strength which realizes itself in being a 'minute apart, *conscious*' in an unconscious world, revitalizing itself over and over again in an endless series of beginnings and ends--all these ideas fuse into the picture of Diony suckling her child in a small shelter of civilization on the borders of the wilderness. The same heroic tones of the classical epic that we heard in *The Time of Man* and *My Heart and My Flesh* are heard again in this 'historical novel' of the eighteenth-century settlement of Kentucky. The ideals so eloquently set down in the logical propositions of the Declaration of Independence are herein graphically dramatized in an effective modern heroic form."

Earl H. Rovit

*Herald to Chaos: The Novels of Elizabeth Madox Roberts*  
(U Kentucky 1960) 48-66

"After *The Time of Man*, it is the best of her novels. It is inferior only in that it shows the hymnal quality of which *The Time of Man* is so happily free. Miss Roberts makes it only too clear that she is celebrating the courage and the endurance of the first settlers of Kentucky; Daniel Boone himself is one of the characters. Diony Hall and Berk Jarvis, with their silent understanding and deep love of each other, with their unflinching heroism and dedication to the development of a new land, might be figures in a mural of pioneers in a post office.

But having said this, let one try to rob the statement of some of its denigration by insisting that it is a good mural. The pace of the story is slow until Diony and Berk arrive at Fort Harrod, but thereafter it is tensely exciting. The murder of Berk's mother by Indians, his leaving his wife and child in a dogged, solitary pursuit of revenge, his long absence and ultimate return, a sullen, possessive Enoch Arden, to take back his wife from another, is as gripping a tale as exists in the fiction of the American frontier.

As in *The Time of Man* the characters are a part of the land which they love and for which they have abandoned the relative ease of Virginia. Diony is a magnificent study of a frontier woman. She loves Berk passionately and tries to persuade herself that he is living long after the rest of the stockade community take for granted that he is dead, but there is no place in that primitive world for a young woman without a man, and her economic need for a second husband is soon enough followed by the pricking of her physical desire for one. Such infidelity would be scarcely imaginable among the embittered heroines of Ellen Glasgow.

Diony's abandonment of her interim husband to return to Berk when he reappears at Fort Harrod makes a remarkably effective ending. Few indeed are the writers who could carry it off without impairing the epic quality of the saga. But Miss Roberts, it should be emphasized, was a good poet as well as a good novelist, and the only writer considered in this volume who was."

Louis Auchincloss

*Pioneers and Caretakers: A Study of 9 American Women Novelists*  
(U Minnesota 1961, 1964, 1965) 130-31

"To most Americans 'the West' is now the West of Kit Carson and Jim Bridger, of Tombstone and Virginia City. The westerns have helped us forget that some part of America was always West. As we sit bored at the wheel of our modern covered wagon, we are probably following an old Indian trail, or a military road built in the wars against the French and their Indian allies, or a pioneer trace. Almost every West had to be conquered by valiant men and women who brought with them the seeds of civilization, carried in precious packs, alone with the provender, the tools for carving a farm from the forest, and the arms need for defense.

The story of the settling of Kentucky, one of the first of the new western regions beyond the Appalachian wall, is as complex as it is exciting. The historians have returned to it repeatedly. Finally, in 1930, a novelist came along who could make the story live in the fictional experiences of the men and women who created. As we shall see later on, Elizabeth Madox Roberts, a daughter of pioneers Kentucky herself, was ideally suited for the task she undertook in writing *The Great Meadow*. But first we should look at the superb materials she had to work with.

Until shortly before the Revolution, the American colonies stayed safely on the eastern side of the Appalachian mountain chain, which stretches diagonally from the Adirondacks to the Blue Ridge and the Great Smokies. It was a forbidding wall, with few natural breaches where wagons or even pack horses could get through. In the north the French had an easy access to what are now Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, because they could use the Great Lakes to take them west. By the 1739's they had forts as far south as Kaskaskia (Illinois) and Vincennes (Indiana).

Yet, long before the Revolution word began to trickle east to civilized Philadelphia and Williamsburg of the rich lands over the mountains. As good acres became scarce on the eastern seaboard, the accounts of the early hunters and surveyors who had penetrated this West were listened to thoughtfully. Of these regions which might one day be settled, Caintuck was the one described most rapturously. The Indians had various names for the region, but the Iroquois name Kentakee was the one that stuck. It means 'meadowland' and was applied to central Kentucky, the Great Meadow of Miss Roberts' novel. It was a demi-Eden, watered by many rivers, fabulously rich in soil, in fur-bearing animals, fish, and useful trees, and in the tall cane which needed no cultivation and could be used for fodder. When John Filson published in 1784 the first history of Kentucky, he wrote from his own observation, but he was also adding to the legend.

#### Air and Climate

This country is more temperate and healthy than the other settled parts of America. In Summer it wants the sandy heats which Virginia and Carolina experience, and receives a fine air from its rivers. In Winter, which at most only lasts three months, commonly two, and is but seldom severe, the people are safe in bad houses; and the beasts have a good supply without fodder.

It was a wonderful land for certain. The difficulty was how to get there. The most plausible route was across western Pennsylvania to the Forks of the Ohio (Pittsburgh), and then down that great waterway and up one of them any rivers that empty into it. But the mountains in Pennsylvania rose wave on wave before Fort Pitt could be reached, and the French yielded their Fort Duquesne on that site only after the campaign of General Forbes (a successful Braddock) in 1758. Western Pennsylvania was still not safe for passage or settlement until 1765. Not until after the Revolution was the Ohio River free from danger. The Indian allies of the French lurked along it, and when the British succeeded the French they bought the loyalty of the Indians, much to the distress of the colonials during the Revolution.

A second possible way to the Great Meadow was along what came to be known as the Wilderness Road. It is over this route that Miss Roberts takes the newly married Diony Hall and Berk Jarvis and their little band of fellow-settlers. The Wilderness Road came into existence because of the discovery of the Cumberland Gap, a great wind gap high up in the Cumberland Mountains, in the extreme southeastern corner of Kentucky. Dr. Thomas Walker, sent out by the Loyal Land Company of Virginia, was the first to record it, writing in his journal in 1750. Besides being the one gateway to the canelands of Kentucky, it had the additional advantage of accessibility to pioneers coming up from the settlements along the Yadkin in

North Carolina, as well as to those moving down from Pennsylvania and Virginia. Daniel Boone used it constantly, for at its end an eastern branch led to Boonesborough, the fort he had built near the Kentucky River. The western branch brought pioneers to the first permanent settlement in Kentucky, Harrod's Town and its fort, in and near which much of the action of *The Great Meadow* takes place.

The difficulties of traversing the Wilderness Road Miss Roberts describes with accuracy. When one left the lower Shenandoah Valley and began the approach to the Cumberland Gap, the mountains came in a seemingly endless procession. The rivers, the Holston and the Clinch, were hard to cross, and the Clinch wound so much that one crossed it many times. From the point on the James River where Berk Jarvis's party fares forth, Harrod's Town is a galling five hundred miles.

When the early settlers reached Boonesborough or Logan's Station (now St. Asaph) or Harrod's Fort, their tribulations had only begun. The Indians had named the region 'the dark and bloody ground,' and by their harassment of the pioneers the name took on new meaning. Many an expedition was put together to march on the Indians north of the Ohio and stop their maraudings, planned and supported in Detroit. The Revolution turned these skirmishes into war in earnest. We forget that the American Revolution was fought in the West as well as along the seaboard. General George Rogers Clark, a young Virginian, matched strategy with the British Governor, Lord Henry Hamilton, known in the settlements as the 'Hair-Buyer.' (The British paid only twice as much for a prisoner as for a scalp; \$100 as against \$50. In August, 1782, one of the bloodiest battles ever fought on the frontier took place at Blue Licks in northern Kentucky. The Indians and British won, but they retreated and left Kentucky safe. Now women could venture out of the stockade and work at the loom and the churn without fear of a shadowy form against the sun or a false owl hoot.

Elizabeth Madox Roberts was destined to make a great novel out of the trials of the Kentucky pioneers. Born in Perryville in 1881 and moving with her family at the age of three to Springfield (seventeen miles farther west), she grew up in the heart of the Great Meadow country. (Jim Harrod's Town is only ten miles from Perryville.) As a child she heard stories of the settlers, for both her father and mother came of pioneer stock. On her mother's side there was an ancestress who had been killed by the Indians near Fort Harrod. The member of the Roberts household who especially cherished the family's history was Elizabeth's maternal grandmother. Later Miss Roberts recalled: 'I used to sit near my grandmother to hear of the wonders of her youth and to hear her thrust memory back into the memories of her father and mother, back through the Wilderness by way of the Trace.'

Elizabeth wanted to go to college but because of ill-health and lack of money she had to wait until she was in her thirties before she could enroll at the University of Chicago. As things turned out, the long years between high school and college were fruitfully spent. Teaching in country schools near home, she entered into the lives of her pupils and their families, heard the gossip and scandal of the countryside, and learned the country speech, near that spoken by Boone and Harrod. She also learned the folk ballads which she later used with such telling effect in her novels. In these years, too, she wrote poetry. When she entered the University of Chicago, she was already a good poet and skilled in reading poetry aloud.

At the university her age was no handicap. Mature and purposeful, she went directly to the things she wanted: literature, music, and philosophy. It was her good fortune to belong soon to an exceptional group of students, all of whom would later make names for themselves as writers: Yvor Winters, Janet Lewis, Vincent Sheean, and Glenway Wescott. In 1922, B. W. Huebsh took a group of poems to which she gave the title *Under the Tree*. They are a real child's garden of verses. The illusion of a little girl observing and speaking is perfect. With this book a distinguished career was launched.

In the fall of 1922 Miss Roberts began her first novel, *The Time of Man*, now her most famous book. No wonder it was instantly a success with critics and public when it was published in 1926. In her years as a teacher she had been storing up impressions of landscape and of the life of the folk which would go into her novel. Her heroine, Ellen Chesser, might have been one of her pupils at Maude or Pleasant Grove. Here, for the first time, Miss Roberts explored the possibilities of a technical device she would use in *The Great Meadow* and other novels: telling the story through the mind and imagination of a young girl growing into womanhood.



With two novels between, *My Heart and My Flesh* (1927) and *Jingling in the Wind* (1928); Miss Roberts began work on *The Great Meadow* in 1928. The idea for it had come to her as early as 1913. It grew, of course, from the stories her grandmother had told her. As she bent to her work, Miss Roberts had a clear vision of what she wanted to accomplish: 'I saw these people coming over the Trace, some of them coming early when there were hundreds of miles of scarcely broken forests to be passed. The drama was brief, but it was full and picturesque. I thought it would be an excellent labor if one might gather all these threads, the elements into one strand, if one might draw these strains into one person and bring this person over the Trace and through the Gateway in one symbolic journey.'

Miss Roberts spent some time on research for *The Great Meadow*, but not very much, since her knowledge of the background was considerable. She worked in the public library in Louisville and in the archives of the Filson Club, which promotes the study of Kentucky's history, in the same city. She went frequently to Harrodsburg to familiarize herself with the terrain and especially to examine every detail of the rebuilt fort, one of the most carefully reconstructed historical monuments in America. There she found the rude cabins built around the square, the blockhouses at the corners, the spring still sending out water as it had done for Harrod and his company, the tools and utensils such as Diony and Berk had used.

By the end of 1929 the novel was finished. On its publication, in March, 1930, *The Great Meadow* was recognized at once as a major achievement. The Literary Guild chose it as the selection for March. Editions appeared in England, Germany, and Spain.

In all this acclaim what pleased Miss Roberts most was the fact that Springfield liked her novel. Her fellow townsmen knew they had a famous author in their midst, but her earlier novels, some thought, did not present the middle Kentucky region in a favorable light. She had come too close to persons and events that might better have been forgotten, and her love for the country ways was read as condescension. In *The Great Meadow* she proved her devotion to Kentucky, old and new.

From the time Cooper's *The Spy* was published in 1821 Americans have been insatiable readers of novels about their country's history. By 1850 more than a hundred novels dealing with the Revolution alone had been issued, about one tenth of the total number of American novels published by that date. Yet very few of the thousands of historical novels written in America rose above mediocrity. Possibly the trouble is with the form itself. Some critics have called it a bastard form, since the historical novelist must join together two unmatched halves. If the historical parts are particularly good, we may mistrust the fiction. If the story is absorbing, we are likely to find the historical episodes intrusive.

One way to assess Miss Roberts' achievement in *The Great Meadow* is to note with what skill she solved the problems which confront the historical novelist. Consider the matter of history itself. These are momentous years that her characters live through, and they know this. But how do they know? Mostly by report and rumor. Distant events of great consequence thunder on the horizon. Further, the two centers of action, the farm at Five Oaks and the fort at Harrod's Town, are places where news-carrying strangers come. Yet the news they bring is news that is personal to them and their listeners, and not the historian's synthesized kind of news. Only once in the novel--and this is done deliberately--does Miss Roberts halt the action to give us a brief account of what Fort Harrod was and who lived there. She calls these few pages 'And Interval.' Coming at the center of the novel, they are a pivot on which the action turns from the old life in Virginia to the new life in Kentucky. And even this historical 'interval' is so written as to suggest the facts about the place as Diony and Berk first received them.

The novelist writing about great moments in history must introduce the figures who helped to make the greatness--in this novel Daniel Boone, Jim Harrod, and young General Clark. The temptation is to elevate the great ones to the status of demigods and to put superheroic speech in their mouths. Notice how deftly Daniel Boone is introduced. Diony meets him by chance at the north gate of the fort, but does not recognize him.

'You are a strange man at Harrod's,' she said. 'What might be your name?'

'Boone is my name,' he said, 'Dan'l Boone.'

They talk for a time about the hardships of pioneering, and Diony thanks him for having marked out the Wilderness Road. 'I'm obliged to you for a road, right obliged and beholden.' Then she witnesses the welcome the men at the fort give Boone, and hears the salute fired in his honor. In their meeting the emphasis is on her reverence for this great helper of pioneers and the conflict of this reverence with her belief, at the same time, that she cannot measure up. Boone tells her 'he was never lost.' She is lost and can never be the Boone kind.

Another temptation of the historical novelist is to indulge in smashing scenes--great battles and world-shaking parleys between demigods. The danger here is that the fictional characters will be dwarfed in the grand panorama. The only smashing scene in *The Great Meadow* is the scalping and death of Elvira, Diony's mother-in-law, whose sacrifice saves Diony's life. This is fiction, but it looks like history. We get much important historical fact mingled with fiction in Berk's long account of his foray among the Indians to avenge his mother's death. We take the fact with the fiction, not distinguishing between them, because Berk's story moves Diony to choose him again as her husband rather than Evan Muir, whom she had married when Berk was given up as dead.

There is also the question of language. How shall these bones speak? For Miss Roberts there was no problem here. For years her poet's ear had recorded the Kentucky cadences and idioms. Boone and Harrod talked the way the fathers of her pupils did. What she had not heard on the lips of living men and women she learned from the ballads which Harrod's people sang and her pupils, more than a century later, also knew. *The Great Meadow* is superb as a novel without the prefix 'historical.' One of its great virtues is its unity of vision, which comes from the fact that this is Diony's story and that we experience all events through her mind and passion. We move from civilization to the wilderness, step by step, with her. Her father has taught her passages from his favorite philosopher, Bishop Berkeley, and the Berkeleian idealism is her religion.

All that happens, happens to her, Diony, and is in her perceiving and creating mind. She gives shape to every event of her journey into the unknown. The central passage for our understanding of this odyssey is her reflection on Berkeley's words while she is spinning wool during the first summer. 'Her thought leaped then beyond articulation and settled to a vast passion of mental desire. Oh, to create rivers by knowing rivers, to move outward through the extended infinite plane until it assumed roundness. Oh, to make a world out of chaos. The passion spread widely through her and departed and her hands were still contriving the creamy fibers of a fleece.'

We should note here that while she is longing to make 'a world out of chaos,' she is also 'contriving the creamy fibers of a fleece.' This reminds us how close to the land she is. 'Diony knew what name she bore, knew that Dione was a great goddess, taking rank with Rhea...that Dione was one of the Titan sisters, the Titans being earth-men, children of Uranus and Terra.' In the turning of the seasons we watch her working with the products of the earth which clothe and feed the family. She acquires all the skills, at the spinning wheel, the loom, the dye pot, the lard kettle, which she will need over the mountain wall in Kentucky.

We see enough of her family to know why she will be the one to go. Her father made this farm for his wife and children. Here they should stay. This is the reason he is angry with Diony for wanting to marry Berk and leave with him. It is a rebuke to her father for not having done enough. With her mother, Polly, the reluctance to give consent stems from a different source. She is a pious woman, a good Methodist. To go into the heathen wilderness is to tempt Providence. This new land belongs to the Indians. 'Hit's already owned. White men are outside their rights when they go there.'

Though Diony does not intend to give in, she respects the views of her father and mother. Toward the brothers, Reuben and Sam, her feelings are different. Reuben, as the older, is already planning what he will do with the place when he inherits, and Sam knows that he will have his portion. But Diony, her brothers tell her, will have to marry to get a place. Their assurances of help in getting a husband--'She's got the marryen mouth,' Reuben says--anger her. She hears a hushed voice from within 'saying some mute word, as "come," or "here you will find me".' So she is ready when Berk comes, assured, resourceful, determined to marry his wife and take her with him over the Wilderness Road.

The remaining member of the family, Betty, the younger sister, must not be forgotten, for she has more of a place in the symbolic structure of the novel than her brothers or her parents. Betty stands for the civilization that has been left behind. She hankers for the kind of life she supposes their cousins back in Tidewater country must be living. She and Diony play a game of going to the great houses, arriving elegantly dressed to make their visit. Diony knows that this will never happen, but she acts the role Betty assigns her in their little drama. For Betty's sake, years later, she befriends Betsy Dodd, 'a Betty who had known hunger and cold,' and to whom pioneer life was as hard as it would have been for sister Betty.

In the continuous excitement of reading *The Great Meadow* one may not notice how extremely simple the 'plot line' is. What do we have? A description of the seasonal activities at Five Oaks, with the news of the Kentucky Eden coming closer and closer to those who inhabit this dog-run house. Then the bustle of the marriage of Diony and Berk and their departure. Then the slow journey to Harrod's Fort. Then Berk's struggle to build the new house in the new land, while the wilderness warfare swirls around them and their man-child Tom. Then Berk's decision (which Diony resists almost to the point of a wife's rebellion) to avenge his mother's scalping. Berk has become an 'Indian hater,' a type well known on the frontier. Finally, the old Enoch Arden situation. But this is no lame conclusion. It is as right as can be. There were many widows on the frontier, but they did not remain widows long. They had to have a man to fend for them, and if he was a man like the good Evan Muir, the widow-woman was lucky. All the frontier forces move Diony to marry Evan, but most powerful among them is the 'chorus' of women in the fort who chant, as it were, 'Berk Jarvis is dead.'

But when Berk returns, his mania cured by his suffering and the scalps he has taken, Diony makes her choice--as the unwritten law of the frontier provided--and chooses the man to whom her inner voice had once said 'here you will find me.' Berk is ready to do what she and he had always wanted. He can now listen to the words with which she had taunted him when they quarreled about his journey for revenge.

'I came to Kentuck to get...What did I come her for? I came to get a fine farm in the cane,' Diony whispered. 'A fine high house, fields all about it.'

Willard Thorp  
Afterward  
*The Great Meadow* (1930)  
(New American Library, Signet 1961) 199-207

"The spectacle of the pioneer surge westward had long played about the edges of Miss Roberts' mind' she once wrote that this subject had in fact fascinated her 'almost...since first I began to think at all'.... Since the westward movement of her ancestors seemed to be for her a sign, it was inevitable, once she had written successful fiction, that she should amplify this subject in a novel which she once described as 'the most simple, direct, elementary, national, and local of all my books.'

Figures like Daniel Boone, Simon Kenton, Benjamin Logan, and James Harrod, with their strength and their gentleness, she said, 'entice the mind to make heroic patterns.' Or as one of the nameless pioneers declares in the novel, 'In each fort [Boonesborough, Fort Logan, and Harrods Fort], all three, is a man you could take for a pattern to make men by.' Immersing her mind in these materials, a 'heroic' pattern emerged in the completed organism of *The Great Meadow*: 'the design mounted and swayed, flowed and receded to its own consummation.' The design for *The Great Meadow*, in accordance with the large contours of its subject, was to unfold slowly; the book, as originally conceived, was to serve between *My Heart and My Flesh* and *He Sent Forth a Raven* as an 'adagio' or slow movement in the Luce cycle.

The spaciousness of sparsely settled eighteenth-century America is reflected not only in the descriptions of the wilderness, as others report it and as Diony Jarvis (Miss Roberts' protagonist) at last sees it, but in the delineation of the chief characters. Even Diony's parents, ending their tranquil days on Five Oaks plantation at Albemarle, Virginia, have large outlines, which suggest the heroic. The Halls are fit descendants of heroic progenitors and are not far removed, in temper and moral strength, from the settlers of the wilderness which continually encroaches upon the plantation.

To Diony the farm is at the parting of the ways, on the divide between Tidewater amenities and frontier rawness, where 'the tilled land and the unbroken forests touched their parts' about her. Thus Diony--even before the stranger startles her imagination by painting the land beyond the mountains--not only projects herself backward into the gracious routines of her Tidewater relatives but outward into the expedition of her brothers as they hunt in the wild Blue Lodge region in the western distance. Her ancestry reflects a divided heritage which sometimes frustrates her but which gives her in the end increased power over herself and her surroundings and increased knowledge of reality. Her mother's people are Methodist mountain folk, having come to the Virginia frontier from Pennsylvania. From her mother, Polly Hall, Diony derives her vigor of constitution and a complete knowledge of domestic life and crafts. On the other hand, her father's people go back many generations in the Tidewater. From Thomas Hall, Diony acquires her respect for knowledge and mental culture and her speculative turn of mind.

Diony is a representative and symbolic figure, since she embodies those contrasting strains, and since she takes this heritage with her into a new country and allows it to govern her actions there.... Polly Hall, Diony's mother, is of imposing presence and regal beauty; her faith is vibrant and her orthodox ideas are expressed with vigor and determination. Her objection on moral grounds to the white man's pre-empting Kentucky from the Indians disturbs the company, and even Thomas Hall's rationalization that the new land should be reserved for the most enterprising race fails to dispel completely the doubts which she has implanted. She is an embodiment of piety mixed with common sense and creative domesticity. Under her direction is woven the intricate footmantle which protects Diony in the wilderness; and Diony has from her the gourd seeds which flourish and grow into a fine crop in Kentucky.

Polly, coming from 'a strong race of women,' acknowledges Diony as her fit successor; she perceives her other daughter Betty to be small and fragile. The implication is that Betty would be destroyed by the dangers and challenges which Diony eagerly confronts.... Betsy Dodd, whose frail and charming femininity at Harrods Fort recalls Betty to Diony's mind, is killed in an Indian raid; her force, like Betty's, would have been unequal in any event to the demands of the frontier.

About Diony's father gather overtones not only of the heroic but of the mythic. His limp and his activity about the forge, most intense while he protests Diony's emigration to Kentucky with her lover Berk Jarvis, recall Vulcan or Hephaestus, the old god of fire and of the arts deriving from the smithy's craft. As a tender of the fire, he is also a Promethean figure, thus Thomas Hall respects the uses of civilization and is their proponent, and he is the source of intellectual light in the novel, with his fervent idealism and advocacy of Berkeley. He is both submerged in the life of the plantation and withdrawn, by his lameness, from it; he is vitally identified with the members of his family and also removed from them, as he raises his hand to comment aloud upon Berkeley's 'The Principles of Human Knowledge,' for example, and then thinks better of it. He is an oracle, much of whose wisdom is self-contained except when he can talk to his temperamental equals like Diony. When he finally gives his comment to her going west, he talks of Rhea (who is sometimes to be identified with the earth or Gaea) as an aboriginal deity who signifies 'succession' and who is apparently synonymous with the Divine Mind or 'the great Mover and Author of Nature' of Berkeley. He also implies that Rhea's children--Jupiter, Vesta, Neptune, Ceres, Juno, and Pluto, and by extension all creatures--reveal in their several ways the traits of the goddess Earth, their mother. As a Vulcan figure, Thomas Hall takes a place among this divine company.

So does his daughter whose name derives from that of a Titan, Dione. Dione was coexistent in time with Rhea; she was the mother by Jupiter of Venus, who of course embodies the elemental force of sex and love which Diony also exemplifies in a new country. As a dynamic feminine presence Diony ministers to the sick during the hard winter of 1778; her own children arouse strong protectiveness in her, and in a moment of deep revelation she feels herself to be the 'common mother' rather than the enemy of all the people in the Ojibway Indian lodge with whom her husband Berk dwell in the North. As a Titan, she regards herself as a descendant of Uranus and Terra, of Heaven and Earth and, like them, as a supplanter of Chaos.

In Kentucky, as if illustrating this mythic ancestry, Diony feels herself to be 'the beginning before the beginning,' the well-spring of all future developments in the land. She holds in 'a chaotic sense of grandeur' these truths concerning her putative descent from the old gods and is 'grateful for a name of such dignity' as Dione. As a symbolic source of later abundance and harmony, she has, before Berk's departure from

Harrods Fort on his mission of vengeance, an apocalyptic vision in which all promises that had led the settlers westward are fulfilled. This vision is epic, for it represents the common aspirations of a whole people as they begin their civil activities in the wilderness. Diony's vision of the future, in fact, has something of the scope of the archangel Michael's in *Paradise Lost* when he foretells the future of the human race or of Anchises in the Sixth Book of the *Aeneid* when he prophesies to Aeneas the glories of the Roman state.

If the other characters are not explicitly identified with actual gods, they are imposing--'half-mythical heroes walking the earth as gods walk.' Their deeds soon became legendary and the foundation for an indigenous mythology. Boone, the most electrifying of these figures, is a kind of benevolent God walking among men and a power behind the scenes as he goes through the wilderness, alone and powerful, self-sufficient and large-minded. Accordingly, he became for Miss Roberts 'a symbol of a man leaping apart from men, thrusting forward to a lonely and hazardous freedom among the natural and chaotic things of the unmapped earth.' Truly 'a wonder among men,' he commands his environment by rising superior to it, towering 'without hate above the beasts and above savage men.' In his freedom from rancor he is superior to Berk Jarvis who far a time loses himself in his hate. Boone's commanding presence seems to Diony the essence of this land; and she feels, as he talks casually to her, 'the breadth of the out-reaching land as she had had report of it from one and another, as if it had been there beside her at the gate, as if it had come in the flesh to breathe and smile, to speak to her.' He does miraculous feats; for example, he escapes from the Shawnees, when all had thought him lost, in time to help his people at Boonesborough during the Indian and British siege of 1778.

'There were giants in the earth in those days,' or so it seems, with Harrod 'a big man that never tires, and a heart in him like pure gold' and with Logan 'his body made big to hold his big heart.' If these men are humble, they are capable of heroic deeds as Logan was when he traveled for a week through the wilderness to secure ammunition for his beleaguered fort: 'a great man, a giant, a hero, walked out of a half-mythical land, striding down through an unbroken way to get ammunition for his people.' Early in the novel the listeners at Five Oaks to Nathan Jones's report of a surveyor's description of Kentucky express as a conjecture what was in fact to happen: 'Such a country would breed up a race of heroes, men built and knitted together to endure...a new race for the earth.' Since the purpose of these pioneers was as selfless as if it was absorbing, their virtues suggest the transcendent: 'their fineness was superior to time and their departure a sure token that they had been but caught in it in ephemeral bondage....' 'The people had not the faith in commerce now prevailing.... They were fundamental, moving among the fundamentals. The substitute is heroic solitude, trees, faith.'

Berk and his mother Elvira partake of this heroic mold. Both are large-framed, and both have quiet confidence. The glancing smile which crosses the lips of both mother and son is emblematic of power held in reserve and of a tacitly acknowledged competence. The first time Diony sees Elvira she is impressed by her height, her dignity, and the large 'planes' in her face. The two women meet when the Halls play host to a Methodist revival meeting and Elvira comes to help Polly. Symbolically, Diony goes back and forth between her mother and her future mother-in-law, the two women who mean most in her life. At present, she fetches for both of them, but she will later go from her mother and cleave to Elvira. Elvira's moral qualities are exceptional: she takes her place immediately with 'the strong women of the fort,' and her 'superhuman goodness'--in sacrificing herself that she may rescue her pregnant daughter-in-law from the Indian marauders--ends by oppressing Diony. Elvira in her death becomes a legend with the Indians as the 'fighting squaw' with strength enough to kill a buffalo.

In his repeated farewells to Diony, Thomas Hall often quotes from the opening lines of the *Aeneid*, discoursing 'of arms and the man,' as if to identify Berk Jarvis with the Aeneas who in ancient times, according to legend, founded the new nation of Italy. Thomas Hall thus recognizes that the wilderness will be the scene of feats performed by epic heroes--a land which will see, as he had preciously declared, 'brave men, a brave race.' Before Berk takes Diony to the wilderness, he had done great deeds in fighting the British and the Indians at the Watauga forts on the Holston River. His military exploits have been scarifying rather than exhilarating. Diony feels more keenly identified with Berk and his dangers than does her father who is too willing, she thinks, to philosophize about war and to disregard its cruelties. Berk's ventures give him a remote, abstracted gaze; it is as if the reality he had been through makes all other

experience pallid, and he attains, perhaps without realizing it, some of his mother's remoteness from the ordinary.

Just as Desdemona fell in love with Othello, so Diony does with Berk: 'she would love him with a rush of passion that almost stilled her heart in its beat, would love him for the dangers he had passed and the cruel images that were pictured on his mind...' Their understanding is perfected on an autumn morning at Albemarle when, under the early sun, frost and mist become a golden cloud to include the lovers and when Berk appears to Diony, as Jupiter did to Danae, in a shower of golden light and falling golden leaves.

On the journey to Kentucky Berk is the epitome of a masculine strength so fundamental as only to be described in sexual terms, 'in the thrust, the drive, in action'; and old Bethel, at the frontier clearing, fashions for him a powder horn, which seems to be in part a phallic emblem, an image of his virility. Berk is always the head of the party, strong-limbed, never showing fatigue, his slow elusive smile 'outrunning fatigue and despair.' In the forward position, pushing always further into the wilderness, he is thus elemental as well as civilized man. In her subordinate place, Diony is elemental as well as civilized woman; her strength is the woman's in a sexual embrace, 'lateral, in the plane, enduring, inactive but constant.' Utilizing the contrasting strengths of the sexes, Berk and Diony are typical of those who find themselves masters of a new world, 'possessing themselves of it by the power of their courage, their order, and their endurance.'

They regard the Kentucky frontier as a land of marvels, an earthly paradise, and are fascinated by the prospect of 'the great wash of grass and life over the rolling plains, mountains, and valleys of the vast meadow.' The stranger whom Berk brings with him to Five Oaks discusses the wonders he has known and fires the imaginations of those who hear him. He is a figure of mystery himself, an aloof and dignified man, but one compelled, like the Ancient Mariner, to repeat to those who will listen the great things he has known. He seems overawed by the strangeness of his experience, he conducts himself with tranquil dignity, and he is so conversant with the elemental realities of nature that civilized ways sit upon him awkwardly: 'He weighted each speech with care, making each phase with pains, as in the way with men who have lived alone and have made decisions without the use of words or speeches.' He describes, for example, the bones of mammoths and vast caves, the ghosts of the Alleghwi which frighten the red men away from the region, the fabulous richness of the canelands, and the primeval beauty of the woodlands in the region.

Stirred by these reports and by the legend of an ivory-billed woodcock to be found in Kentucky, Berk and Diony exchange looks which mean that they want to go to this land of beauty, 'to paradise, so beautiful and good, attaining something beyond themselves.' The actuality does not disappoint, although as Miss Roberts said in her journal, it was less a fruition for the pioneers than 'the new beginning.' The land is rich, animal life is abundant, the woodlands are imposing, the beauty of the land is enthralling, so that Diony is 'shaken with delight and wonder,' at 'the delirium of a fine land, level expanses delicately tilted to fine curves, here and there can patches of rich fat growth, here and there noble trees.' This is truly God's original Eden, or the land of Canaan lying on the other side of the wilderness. That sinful man corrupts a veritable Eden is, however, the all too disquieting truth. White men have debased the Indians, as Diony learns when Blackfox and his companions push at the door of the cabin to get at her and Elvira and utter the vile oaths they have been taught.

#### Structure of *The Great Meadow*

*The Great Meadow* is organized by chronology and spans the years 1774 to 1781, roughly the era of the Revolutionary War which hovers in the background always as a sinister accompaniment to the central drama of reclaiming the wilderness. The war reaches west to the new region and is more savage there since the British arm and lead the Indians, often reluctant to fight, in campaigns against the settlers. The progression of this novel is forward since the actual moment is all-important in the pioneer struggle for survival. There are few flashbacks, for a rigorous life in the present dims even the memory of the past.

The structure of *The Great Meadow* is firmly balanced among three main masses of material, each comprising three chapters of the novel. The first group of three chapters, covering the years 1774-77, presents Diony's life at Albemarle, her qualities of character, and the personalities of those to whom she reacts and adjusts. Except for Berk's absence at the Watauga forts and his return, there is little direct action.

Three years pass, but little transpires that involves Diony's direct participation until she must choose between Berk's pioneer daring and her sister Betty's civilized amenity.

The next three chapters cover the years 1777-78 and describe Diony's journey over the Trace to the Kentucky wilderness and her life at Harrods Fort. This middle section has two centers of interest: the daily life and adjustments of the pioneers to a primitive existence, and the scalping of Elvira by two predatory Indians. Chapter VI records the struggle between Diony and Berk over his mission of vengeance against the Indians and his abandonment of Diony.

The concluding three chapters treat Diony's life in Kentucky during the years 1778-81, when she is placed on her own after Berk leaves. In Chapter VII (1778-79) Diony concludes that Berk must be dead, for if he were alive his indomitable spirit would not let him stay away from her. With some reluctance but with increasing tenderness she attends to Evan Muir, Berk's friend, and marries him. Her own need for male protection in a wild land and Evan's steadiness and 'life-furthering goodness' are, in the end, stronger than her faith in Berk's superhuman powers. Perhaps also that 'apathy which comes when the emotions or possibilities of emotion are exhausted' overpowers Diony at this point--apathy which, as Miss Roberts writes in her journal, 'surpasses our powers to endure.' Chapter VIII (1779-81) is somewhat huddled; it covers in short compass two years of Diony's life with Evan Muir in the house which Berk had built for her.

Because Diony's relations with Evan are not fully developed, the scene in Chapter IX when the rival husbands confront each other lacks complete urgency, relevance, and force. Chapter IX begins with Diony's sense of material well-being with Evan; Berk disrupts this harmony by his return after a three-year span of captivity among the Shawnees. Diony's neighbors, the Harmons, suggest the only possible course of action in a new land: the woman will choose the man she will live with. Though this scene has been much admired by Miss Roberts' critics, I agree with Rovit that it is much less effective than other parts of the book. He alleges that the differences between the men are no so clearly drawn in the novel as Miss Roberts had summed them up in her notes: Berk 'the forward darting, hazardous spirit'; Muir 'domestic, quiet, predicted.' But I feel this scene lacks impact for still another reason. Miss Roberts had so well realized Diony's sense of isolation and frustration at Berk's departure, had so consummately analyzed Diony's despair during the night she spends in the hostile forest, and had so completely conveyed the truth that those like Berk who take up the sword in vengeance perish by it, that his reappearance is, to say the least, anticlimactic. There is also something specious in his accounts of his hardships and travels. He has, of course, some of Diony's own sense of the spirit's sanctity when he discloses that the Indians could not have benefited by his 'thinking part' if they had killed and eaten him.

On his return, however, he is uncomprehending and unremorseful as to the consequences of his desertion of Diony for what was, after all, a fool's errand. If Berk possesses force, he still lacks, after his travels and sufferings, judgment and insight; and there is much to be said for Muir's industry and dependability. The image of Berk is not completely blurred, but his heroism is much less imposing at the end of the novel than it had been on the outward move into the wilderness and in the building of his spacious house. The image of Muir, moreover, is never quite in focus; as a main character he does not become a force until Chapter VII, and his individualizing qualities are not sharply defined even then. The worth of the book depends upon Diony's consistent psychology, a sustained seriousness until this last chapter, and a combination of the clear realism and the stirring poetry that had also been remarkable in *The Time of Man*.

The chronological method is straightforward rather than devious and indirect; and it records, besides Diony's pilgrimage to the wilderness, the journey of a whole people. Thomas Hall had consented to Diony's going with Berk mainly because the Divine plan, as he perceives it, dictates that 'historic man' must give men who have no history the benefits and order of those who do: 'Civilized man is forever spreading more widely over the earth, historic Man bringing such men as have no history to humble themselves and learn their lesson.' In such a light, Berk and Diony are archetypal pioneers and explorers. In Miss Roberts' design Diony especially sums up in her personal life the larger experience of the race....

Diony's complex origin in different cultural strands increases her awareness of her unique destiny. She perceives that these inherited tendencies dictate her passion for Berk, causing her to regard him as the

person who will help her 'move all the past outward now' into the wilderness. It was Miss Roberts' intent, according to her journal, to have Diony perceive the related truth that her own character, woven from different strands, would provide her with her sole resource in a new land. Her parents 'found forms into which they fitted themselves--courts, trials, wills, worship, property, family, amenities. But in the wilderness I found nothing of this but what I brought. I found, but look what I found. Simple and elemental life, sensation, danger.'

Though Diony lacks the main strength of Berk and Boone, she has a more sophisticated sense of her historic role than they do. Although these men of action set up the framework for civil order, they prize, for the most part, an institutional law, important enough in its place, but less significant than the intuitive harmony men may achieve with one another. Legal justice is a necessity, but more urgent still is the modulation of institutions by the spirit within, with the aim of securing a more flexible, altruistic, ideal kind of polity. One time, making soap in Berk's absence, Diony thinks of justice and pursues the inquiry, ever more deeply, to some diminishing point of knowledge. Before she abandons this inward search, however, she catches sight of a 'little harmony which men are able to make with one another or with a few kinds.'

This is the ultimate civilizing influence, represented by Diony more than by Berk, by Thomas Hall more than by Boone. Father and daughter espouse an ineffable law that is superior to but comprehends the written law by which the majority of men--including even Berk and Boone, pioneers in the world's work--are governed: 'Diony represents ordered life and the processes of the mind, the mind life. She is not of the Boone kind. She feels lost in an indefinite universe. She wants ordered ways. She wants beauty and dignity and ceremony and the reasons of all things.' Symbolically both Berk and Diony are needed to conquer a wilderness. Berk's strength in the long run would count for little were it not to be supplemented by Diony's insight and influence, of the 'tame' rather than the 'wild' sort.

#### Diony's Symbolic Journey

Externally, *The Great Meadow* records events in their actual sequence. In actuality, as we saw in discussing the first three chapters, structure is a matter principally of Diony's consciousness. Or put another way, the true measure for time is internal. For the sensitive individual the great moment is the only significant one, and the psychological impression made by an event is the only lasting one. Because in Chapter IX Diony is so much affected by what happens after Berk's return, it seems that many years, instead of one evening, have passed since she lit the candles before his arrival. If the outer organization of *The Great Meadow* features the geographical journey of the pioneers in which Diony takes part, the more subtle organization of the novel records Diony's spiritual journey...

For Diony...the mind is 'sovereign' and the mental assimilation of a fact all-important. The 'garment of sense' is the outward integument of reality; to get to its core, one must go 'within again and yet again, a hushed voice farther within saying some mute word as 'come,' or 'here you will find me.' So Diony's journey westward becomes an ever more intense realization of the self, a broadening of spiritual perspectives, a deepening of the inner consciousness, a struggle 'to isolate the conscious part.' For Miss Roberts 'Diony is a creature of the mind, moving always more inwardly.'

On the journey westward, Diony feels herself restored each morning after the hardships of the day before--'renewed life welling up in her vital part.' After the tragedy in which Elvira is killed and Diony is severely wounded, Diony's spirit once again lifts up in affirmation the following spring--at that time the spring winds are 'bathing all her flesh with a quick desire for more life and a delight in all that she had.' From one point of view, Diony sees the individual as finite, almost insignificant in the cosmic scheme of things: 'Men seemed of little account, measured by the breath of a throat which was lightly taken and lightly quenched. Light breath huddled within the stockade, desiring life, but when some sudden crack-of-doom snuffed light out it went without protest.' Contrary to this is Diony's more characteristic sense of herself as 'eternal, as if all that she did now were of a kind older than kings, older than beliefs and governments.' Although nature sometimes seems the only great reality, at other times it is a changeful and fluctuating force, and then the human gives the only fixed principle. In any event the human consciousness interprets and illuminates experience.



Like Miss Roberts' other heroines, Diony has a sensibility so acute as to approach at times the neurasthenic. So intense are her reactions to the world that she seems always at the point of exhaustion, except that her inner resources are endless. Even before she knows that she will go to Kentucky, 'her whole body swayed toward the wilderness' in answer to the deepest aspirations of her being. On the actual trip much strain accompanies new vistas as they appear to her and as she projects herself forward into each perspective with a nervous, eager spirit: 'She entered each view, thrust forward from within, as if the mind of the Spirit beyond herself were unfolding itself to her continually, as if she went forward eagerly to meet each disclosure.'

Her imagination is excessively active when she strains to reach the truth; as a result, one element of her experience, regarded obsessively, frequently distorts her total vision, though new discriminations may thereby result. When Berk comes home from the Watauga forts and describes the brutal realities of war, Diony is disturbed almost to the point of hysteria by the fascination of his audience with his tale--an interest that ignores, she senses, some of the grosser aspects of battle... Diony's mind broods, even to morbid excess. When she is convinced of Berk's death, she is unable to accept this knowledge until it has entered deep into her psyche, 'her inner part feeding forever on what it lacked.'

For Diony, as for the other Roberts' heroines, a charged significance she invests the perceptions of the senses, the ultimate source of our inner knowledge. In Kentucky Diony knows her tools by the kinesthetic impress they have made upon her nerves, 'each one intimately sensed at the ends of her fingers and in the lifting parts of her arms and shoulders.' Similarly, she feels that, in order to understand another's soul one must work inward from the individual's outward aspect. Thus Diony feels that, in order to know Berk's spirit, she must know more of him as a person: 'A deep wish arose within her on the instant, a wish to know more of the structure of his being, to know all that he remembered and all that he saw as he looked outward, and to touch all with her own knowledge, and to know what it would be to him to go.'

In an opposite sense, one's life in the imagination can only be discerned exactly when it is translated into the impressions of sense. When Diony at the beginning of the novel thinks of herself as living in cultured ease in the Tidewater, she realizes the experience only after she imagines herself at the spinet as 'the tunes tingled in her arms and in her shoulders, wanting an outlet by way of her hands...' The re-creation of emotional experience is also incisive. When Berk is fitting a new handle to his knife and fashioning his axe for the journey of revenge, Diony gives in to fear, to helplessness, and to a sense of the irrationality of what is taking place; she feels with startling effect 'a sudden chill spread through her to stiffen her bones and put minute bristling fine hairs of pain over her skin.'

Diony's mind tends to express emotional and intellectual experience in terms of sense impressions. The Roberts heroines are all of the, in essence, poets. The image, as in poetry, often exerts a spell in Miss Roberts' books that the abstract idea or the naked emotion would lack. Accordingly, the Revolutionary War becomes a reality to Diony only when she pictures it as a great bird overspreading the land, with one wing representing the eastern battlefields and the other the frontier skirmishes. This same image of a gigantic fowl with outstretched wings sums up for Diony the opposition expressed at Five Oaks to her going with Berk after Thomas Hall gives his consent: one wing represents the silent Sallie Tolliver, whose frontier life has been traumatic; the other, Betty, who rejects the wilderness as something too stark for her comprehension.

Diony's pilgrimage to the West results not only in her psychological enlargement but in her moral development. The journey to the wilderness tests her spirit, and she is adequate to most crises though she often feels unequal to some of the other women. She is not one of those who hang back, however, from going past the Wall to the wilderness road beyond. Through Elvira's death Diony grows to her greatest stature; the dying woman, as it were, transferred her own great strength to her.

The difficulties the individual encounters in attaining command over nature and the self are all the more terrifying for being subjectively felt. The struggle for survival is acute. To the terror and loneliness and weariness of the long passage other hardships succeed which further test the strength of the pioneers. Children cry for milk in the winter of 1777-78, when little food of any kind exists; in the second year clothing becomes rags, and nothing is available to weave new cloth from. Even animal skins for moccasins

are lacking so that Diony's feet are continually bare. Certain external aspects of 'the promise land' reflect the hard struggles of human beings to survive. When Berk describes the Lick where the rock has been worn thin by the tongues of animals through centuries and where the bones of the slain animals lie strewn about, Diony immediately envisions herself crushing the innumerable skulls underfoot as she walks there. The skulls are not only a sign of nature's profuseness but of the failure of innumerable animals to survive in a cruel struggle for existence. Diony's scattering the remains with her feet is, in essence, as casual as nature's attitude toward the fate of her creatures.

Not only beasts but men must struggle for survival as hostile forces continually close in upon the stockade from without. The Indians commanded by British officers besiege all the forts except Harrods, skirmishes with the Indians are routine, the much-prized cane becomes a place of ambush for the red men, and even a man of peace like Muir cries out in his sleep when the memories of war leap up from deep within. The menace to security is greatest during the fall season when life in the wilderness is outwardly the most peaceful and beautiful. The autumn of 1778 had been, however, a time of drought; and a smokelike haze had hung over the wilderness as if 'the known world' were smoldering away, to be followed by a new mode of life, suitable for only the hardest of the settlers: 'A new way of being was required to meet the burnt-out lifeless hills.'

Miss Roberts uses the vivid image, often at widely separated points in the novel, to express the harshness of frontier existence. The references to wolves sum up the savagery the pioneers must withstand and conquer. Hearing them the first night of her marriage, Diony knows her way would be 'toward the way of the wolves'; and she only feels secure from the 'danger and blood-hunger and hate' which they signify when she nestles close to Berk. Berk, to qualify as leader, must have animal shrewdness and cunning; sometimes he actually seems vulpine in aspect: 'lean as the wolf-man assuming the wolf to overcome the wolf.' Wolves cry in the distance by Elvira's grave when Diony has her vision of a civilized future for Kentucky, and their cries add to her terror the night she is locked out from the fort and spends the time in the forest.

Similarly, the supposed owl cries (in reality, two Indians signaling one another) reveal all that is sinister, ominous, and mysterious about the wilderness. They awaken Diony at the pass before the Great Wall; and she hears them again when she is locked out of the fort. The Tory Tree with the three swaying bodies which Muir had seen in the spring of 1777, the scalps triumphantly hanging over the Watauga forts as memories of the bloody fights of the year before, Elvira's scalp with its one silver lock which becomes Blackfox's prize, the three scalps which Berk sends home to Diony and which she hangs over the fireboard, and the burning of these scalps as a sign of the uselessness of Berk's errand when Diony accounts him lost--all keep before us the nearness of death in the everyday life of these people. Over the forest, when Berk's absence is prolonged, there is for Diony no star of hope, but 'a great star...a bright token of loneliness and cold and danger' to convey the actualities of pioneer life.

The wall image is used at many points in the novel to indicate the great obstacles which the pioneers must surmount in their journey westward and as a sign of these obstacles overcome by their courage, resourcefulness, and strength. The great cliff Wall to the West, barring the entrance to Kentucky, is present early in the novel when the stranger mentions it. As Diony and the pioneers go forward, the Wall stands up in front of them, 'a wonder to dread'; it makes 'the heart leap and lie down still in the breast,' inspiring awe and dread at the same time. The cliffs become an overhanging presence, causing night to come quickly and bringing out the travelers' latent fears and insecurity: 'Hardness settled over the camp, hate and despair and fright.'

Whereas the rock wall signifies that the wilderness keeps people at a distance, other types of wall keep the encroaching forest out of settled areas. The high stockade walls provide a barricade against the wilderness, and viewed from outside, they seem 'unyielding and secure.' Powerful as they are, their strength is of little moment compared to the power of what lies outside. This Diony realizes on the night she spends in the forest thinking of Berk's undoubted death: 'The stockade stood, straight and stark, as of little account in the night, but shut within itself, involuted to secure its way of being from what lay outside.' After her marriage to Evan, Diony is glad to be living in the house which Berk built with its high protective walls, and she is relieved to be free from the boundaries of the stockade. The sides of the house are equal to the

pressures placed upon them by the wall of trees behind, the vanguard of the wilderness which stretches beyond the cleared farm.

The most significant sign of Diony's increased maturity in Kentucky, as she analyzes her own mind, is a greater understanding of her father's thought. So the inner journey in the novel is not only psychological and moral but philosophical and spiritual as well; it is a journey toward the realization of 'grand thoughts... from some power beyond the world.' Without the enlargement of her perspectives which then takes place, she would not have been able to bring her experiences into relation with what she gleaned from her father's books. She had learned that, until they are perceived by the mind, objects do not properly exist: 'For as to what is said of the absolute existence of unthinking things without any relation to their being perceived, that seemed perfectly unintelligible. Their *esse* is *percipi*, nor is it possible they should have any existence, out of the minds or thinking things which perceive them.' Mind, at both the human and divine levels, is creative. We as human beings create by actually perceiving and thinking.

Thus as new scenes unroll to Diony's view on the way westward, she in essence creates that toward which she rides; a new world comes into existence for her gradually, 'like mist taking shape.' The eternal spirit, 'the great Mover and Author of Nature,' creates also by an active process, by bringing to actuality what has been latent within its vast body, where 'all unimagined and unwilling and unremembered acts' or objects reside until someone calls them into being. The wilderness is a kind of vast repository of unknown experience--unknown because it has not been experienced by the receptive and sensitive mind; known only as yet to 'the Great Author of Nature.' By going to the wilderness one may come at some aspects of the Divine Mind he could not find elsewhere. Partly, this is why Diony is fascinated with the West and why Thomas lets her go with Berk.

Diony's metaphysical desire to make a world out of chaos also finds actual expression in her westward journey. In Thomas Hall's philosophy the tendency of Creation is toward order, 'the eternal aptitude of matter [revealing] the wholesomeness of the necessities inherent in things.' Like the Great Author of Nature, Diony would also evolve pattern from disorder; she learns from her father that 'the kept law' is greater than 'the deflected law'; she sees in Berk and Boone--and herself--'the power of reason over the wild life of the earth'; and she feels that with war's end, discord has lessened and that a new, more disciplined age is about to come into being.

Diony finds the irresistible connection between the outer and inner worlds by subjecting the most imposing outer reality--nature--to the workings of her mind. She had, in fact, learned from her father that the Author of Nature both speaks through men and reveals himself to them in their perceptions of the universe: 'Men...were the mouths of the earth, and through them the earth spoke in general; but a man, in the particular instance, might understand and interpret and might see the signs out forth by the Author and Designer to reveal what lay under the outer show of properties and kinds.' Diony, as one such sensitive individual, is in deep accord with the wonders she finds in the new world; and example is her vibrant reaction to the beauty of spring in the wilderness, when Berk comes back from salt-making to find his newborn son.

Nature is almost lavish in her bounty to the pioneers, flaunting for them the resources of a rich land. Diony is impressed by the bounty of nature and by the possibilities of the future here; the land seems fair to her as she contemplates it from the stockade walls. The men are making homes and security is coming to the wilderness; so Diony's vision of farms with stone walls and rail fences and lush crops is partly realized by the end of the novel. The flourishing corn, described in sexual terms, symbolically defines the great fertility of the land. The identification of the settlers with the growing plants as representing their own flesh 'held in abeyance' is a notable example of Miss Roberts' habitual uniting in her fiction of the psychological with the concrete....

There is division from, as well as identity with, the land. When Diony is convinced that Berk is dead, she has her dark night of the soul at a time when 'the new life in the earth leaped and quivered with the throbbing leaves and the swaying herbs.' This is also a season of death as of promise: 'The night was full of spring and death, birth coming forth by compulsion to meet death on the way.' Ordinarily receptive to nature's beauty and bounty, Diony is oppressed now by a sense of the impersonal, incessant energies in

nature, which operate according to law but to a law rigorous and often inexplicable. She does not reject her Berkeleyian idealism, but she has doubts as to the beneficence of Nature's great Author. For a time, she loses her accustomed sense of rapport with the power behind nature and feels herself alone in the world, as she is now physically alone in the wilderness with her boy Tom...

Her abstract fears are given concrete form...when she awakes in terror and senses the promiscuous life surrounding her in the forest. Diony's sense of pattern and order return when she hurries back to the fort, but she knows, more certainly than before, that chaos lies at the outer fringes of civilization to undermine it upon slight provocation.

Nature is not the only means through which Miss Roberts bridges the inner and outer worlds. She also makes use of a cluster of images based upon weaving and spinning. Throughout the novel, clothmaking is symbolic of the civilized crafts through which the pioneers make an ordered life in the wilderness. The degree to which, on the outside, the land is mastered is to be measured by the progress of clothmaking within the home. The footmantle, woven at Albemarle by Polly and Diony Hall, stands for the arts of civilization; and it survives hard usages which take the lives of some settlers. Order finally comes to Harrods Fort when, after abortive attempts at clothmaking through the use of buffalo wool and of fibers from nettles, flax is cultivated, Elvira's wheel is put to use, and sheep become a part of the pioneer farm.

The weaving of cloth not only measures the visible progress of civilization; the process is also used metaphorically to describe Diony's efforts to reach spiritual reality. As Rovit says, weaving in Miss Roberts' work connotes the expansive aspects of the experiential process itself. The intricate manipulating of the threads and the emergence of a design represent for Diony her incremental endeavors to possess a continually elusive truth. In fact, her mental responses to external stimuli parallel the process of the textile craft: her thought rides on the currents set in motion by the rhythms of weaving, and the news that Berk will some day go to Kentucky (she is spinning while his brother Jack delivers a message from him) 'spread outward through the threads of her nerves to the last fine web of sense.'

Characteristically while she works, words like 'I Diony,' whereby she affirms the reality of her being, are interwoven into the threads as she forms her web, and the finished web becomes part of an attained inner harmony. The recurrent rhythms when she is spinning wool cause her also to think of her father's volumes of Berkeley and their meaningful phrases. The words and the wool are merged to form a composite fabric in her mind. All this is prelude to a still more arresting revelation. Spinning flax in Betty's company, Diony has a profound sense of spiritual illumination when, after thinking of her father's books, she holds with firmness for a moment 'the inner thought, the inner realization' and then falls into a dreaming trance, 'her senses a web of unknowing fibers that reached into and among the fibers of flax.'

Considering, then, the extent to which Miss Roberts brings in the psychological and the metaphysical, we might be justified in viewing *The Great Meadow* as only incidentally an historical novel. That history serves mainly as setting for the drama of the inner life Miss Roberts herself acknowledged. While she respected factual accuracy, she also intended to use 'as little history as I required to make my motive run. But I have been obliged to keep much in mind to fit these fictitious happenings between authentic reports in a life-like way'."

Frederick P. W. McDowell  
*Elizabeth Madox Roberts*  
(Twayne 1963) 85-106

"As a prologue to *My Heart and My Flesh*, Roberts had introduced an archetypal city and Luce, whose need to discover the sources of life would occasion a series of novels spanning Kentucky's history. With *The Great Meadow*, Roberts continued--and abandoned--her plan. Diony Jarvis, in Albemarle, utters a Berkeleyian wish: 'Oh, to create rivers by knowing rivers, to move outward through the extended infinite plane until it assumed roundness. Oh, to make a world out of chaos.' The westward journey is for her, then, a journey of her mind ever inward. Like Ellen, her sensibility and imagination lead to the identification of inner and outer worlds. Her marriage to Berk Jarvis, the Boone type, joins his physical power to her domestic power, 'lateral' and 'enduring'--civilizing. As Jo Reinhard Smith demonstrates, it is the epic journey of Aeneas to establish an old culture in a new land.

Later, in Berk's absence, Diony feels lost, allied in some mysterious way 'to the distant crying of wild turkeys.' Her 'sense of the hostility of the forest life, of the horror of the indefiniteness of the outside earth' brings her to see 'another way of knowing' than Berkeley's, which she can define only as mystery. Her choice of Berk over Muir when Berk returns after her remarriage reflects godly power, like that of her Greek namesake, Dione, but Diony is modest. In the end, her weaving a metaphor for the order she would make, she finds 'a little harmony which men are able to make with one another or with a few kinds'."

William H. Slavick  
"Elizabeth Madox Roberts"  
*Fifty Southern Writers after 1900*  
eds. Joseph M. Flora and Robert Bain  
(Greenwood 1987) 416-17

Michael Hollister (2021)