

Elizabeth Hardwick:
Writer, co-founder of 'The New York Review of Books'
and long-suffering wife of Robert Lowell
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Elizabeth Bruce Hardwick, writer and critic: born Lexington, Kentucky 27 July 1916; married 1949 Robert Lowell (died 1977; one daughter; marriage dissolved 1972); died New York 2 December 2007.

Elizabeth Hardwick secured an enduring place in American letters as a literary and social critic of formidable intelligence and casually brilliant stylishness. She never espoused the ideology of feminism, yet she wrote illuminating essays on such diverse women writers as Christina Stead (whose novels she helped rescue from neglect in the 1960s), Dorothy Wordsworth, Jane Welsh Carlyle and her close friend Mary McCarthy. In "The Subjection of Women", from the collection *A View of My Own* (1963), she observes: "Women live longer, safer lives than men and a man may, if he wishes, choose that life; it is hard to believe a woman could choose, like Rimbaud, to sleep in the streets of Paris at 17."

Hardwick certainly lived a long life, but in no measure can it be accounted safe. Her 23-year marriage to the poet Robert Lowell ensured that misery would have a place on the domestic agenda. She was born in Lexington, Kentucky, in 1916, the eighth in a family of 11 children. Her father ran a plumbing and heating business, and he and his wife held left-leaning views, which Elizabeth inherited. Her sympathy for the poor, which remained constant, and her genuine understanding of the menial and thankless jobs they have to take in order to survive, stemmed from childhood.

She was educated at Henry Clay High School in Lexington, and at the University of Kentucky. Then, in 1939, she moved to New York to undertake graduate work at Columbia. She dropped out after two years and became a freelance writer, reviewing books for highbrow journals like *Partisan Review*, edited by the influential Philip Rahv, with whom she had a brief affair. As she recounts in her one truly successful novel, *Sleepless Nights* (1979), her life in Manhattan was composed of "love and alcohol and clothes on the floor".

She shared an apartment in the Hotel Schuyler on West 45th Street with a gay friend from Kentucky and cast off the strict Protestantism in which she had been raised in favour of a bohemian existence of uncomplicated love affairs and visits to the many night-clubs where jazz was regularly performed. The pages devoted to Billie Holiday in *Sleepless Nights* are among the most starkly beautiful she ever wrote. She talks of Billie's "luminous self-destruction", her "glittering, sombre and solitary" presence, of her "creamy lips, oily eyelids, violent perfume": Somehow she had retrieved from darkness the miracle of pure style. That was it, only a fool imagined that it was necessary to love a man, love anyone, love life. Her own people, those around her, feared her. And perhaps even she was often ashamed of the heavy weight of her own spirit, one never tempted to the relief of sentimentality. Elizabeth Hardwick first met Robert Lowell at a party given by Rahv and his wife at their Greenwich Village apartment in 1946. Lowell was in the typically messy process of divorcing Jean Stafford, a talented short-story writer who abandoned her gift to spend more time with the bottle. They met again at Yaddo, the famous writers' retreat in upstate New York, and married in 1949.

Before their honeymoon was over, Lowell had to be confined in hospital following a particularly severe bout of manic depression. Shock treatment was applied to the hapless patient. After he was released from the Payne Whitney Clinic, the couple embarked on a European tour a period, Hardwick was to recall, of "gorgeous absorption and infinite passion". While teaching in Salzburg, Lowell imagined himself in love with one of his students, thus precipitating another serious breakdown.

This pattern persisted throughout their time together, although there were intervals of great happiness. Hardwick gave birth, at the age of 40, to a daughter whom they called Harriet. Lowell, constantly prone to infatuations, was serially unfaithful to his wife, who exhibited limitless patience and fortitude in extremely trying circumstances. She kept their marriage intact, despite several partings, and, in Boston in 1961, the reunited pair had their "best summer of all".

In 1963, Elizabeth Hardwick, along with Jason and Barbara Epstein, was involved in the founding of *The New York Review of Books*. In her role as "editorial adviser", she exerted considerable influence on the paper's style and content, and contributed many memorable essays to it, the last appearing in 2003 on the quirky Nathanael West, the author of *Miss Lonelyhearts*.

Hardwick's long-suffering patience with the disturbed man she loved finally ran out in 1970, when Lowell fell for a serious contender, in the form of Lady Caroline Blackwood, a member of the Guinness dynasty and a witty and talented novelist who, in common with Stafford, was an alcoholic. Lowell and Hardwick divorced in 1972, and Lowell's third wife gave him a son, Sheridan.

In his collection of poems *The Dolphin* (1972), Lowell made use of Hardwick's anguished letters and phone calls to him, sometimes misquoting from them for dramatic effect, against the considered advice of their mutual friend, the poet Elizabeth Bishop. When he died of a heart attack in 1977, he was in a taxi in New York on his way back to Lizzie, who had afforded him support during the years in which he produced his best poetry.

Besides the semi-autobiographical *Sleepless Nights*, Hardwick produced two other novels *The Ghostly Lover* (1945), an evocation of her southern youth, and *The Simple Truth* (1955), which is concerned with a murder trial in Iowa City, where she and Lowell lived and taught. These pale in comparison to her collections of essays: *A View of My Own*; *Seduction and Betrayal* (1974); *Bartleby in Manhattan* (1983) and *Sight Readings: American fiction* (1998). Her last book was an acclaimed short biography of Herman Melville, a novelist she revered, published in 2000.

I interviewed Elizabeth Hardwick for a radio documentary on the subject of southern American fiction I was presenting and writing in the late 1970s. She lamented William Faulkner's stylistic lapses while acknowledging his genius, and she declared that she was fed up with the "spaced-out virgins" in the plays of Tennessee Williams. She was very gracious and charming.

In her wonderfully acute essay on Jane Carlyle in *Seduction and Betrayal*, Hardwick notes: The domestic torment the Carlyles endured in their long marriage is of a particular opacity due to the naturalness of so much of it, to its origin in the mere strain of living. The conflicts were not of a remarkable kind and domestic discontent was always complicated by other problems of temperament and by the unnerving immensity of Carlyle's literary undertakings.

Thomas Carlyle, who is virtually unread today, was the monumental figure, but Jane survives in her endlessly observant letters, stuffed with everyday trivia.

"They were, first of all, persons who drifted in and out of unhappiness, within the course of a single day," Hardwick writes. There can be no doubt that she held her own marriage to Lowell in mind as she penned that unforgettable sentence.

Paul Bailey