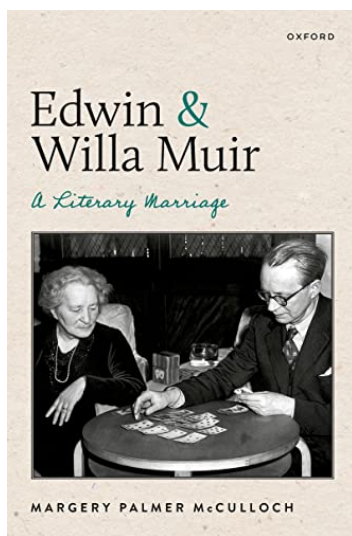


'Edwin and Willa Muir: A Literary Marriage', by Margery Palmer McCulloch

Review by Richie McCaffery



Edwin Muir and his poetry, prose and literary criticism have long been the cynosure of critical attention, although some of it misguided and reductive as Palmer McCulloch points out here. In a strongly loving and literary marriage of two driven intellectuals living through some of the most pivotal and turbulent moments in the twentieth century, Willa Muir has only in recent years started to emerge in her own right in academic reappraisals. In a number of ways this fine book is a bittersweet document, ending inevitably with the death of Edwin in 1959 and then, over a decade later, Willa in 1970. Palmer McCulloch devotes two chapters to Willa's productive but stricken subsequent life without her partner of forty years and while it makes for poignant reading it also means the focus is on her later achievements, some of which were still in service to the furtherance of Edwin's legacy.

This book is a celebration of the Muirs and their extraordinary pro-European peripatetic lives but we should not overlook a third death - that of the author Margery Palmer McCulloch, who died in late 2019 while the manuscript of this book was largely finished but not yet ready for publication. This task was

completed by Professor Roderick Watson and all Muir scholars and readers past and present owe him a debt of gratitude for getting this book over the finishing line.

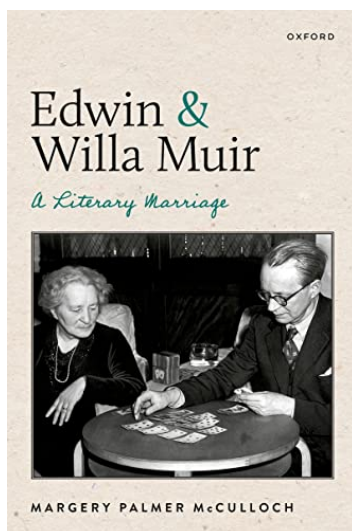
Anyone who knew Margery in at least the last decade of her life knows that her main driving force as a scholar and researcher was her determination to complete her passion project - a biographical and critical monograph on Edwin and Willa Muir and the importance of their relationship. It's worth saying that the Muirs preoccupied Margery from at least the 1990s when she published the much slimmer study *Edwin Muir: Poet, Critic and Novelist* (1993). It is sad that Margery did not live to see the physical fruition of her labours and while she was able to enjoy the valuable work done on Willa by Aileen Christianson, for instance, she also missed Emily Pickard's 2021 PhD thesis *The Other Muir* as well as the 2023 publication of Willa's late 1940s Prague 'Putsch' novel *The Usurpers*. Willa Muir lived just long enough to see the warm reception of her final book, *Belonging*, but Margery was not afforded this for her own although the book we are left with is sure to become the benchmark biography of not only Willa but also Edwin Muir for many years to come.

Having written about Edwin Muir's poetry in the past, I felt I had at least a potted idea of the activities and movements of the Muirs throughout their eventful lives. However, one of the most striking aspects of this book is the surprising discovery of just how itinerant this couple were, often not just changing address but sometimes country and even continent every few years until they were into retirement age. One of the lamentable things we learn is that their cottage at Swaffham Prior - where Edwin died shortly after - was their first home of their own and Willa found herself in the early 1960s even being deracinated from there by her own son and daughter-in-law. McCulloch's account of Willa's unsettled and infirm last years is particularly upsetting but while their domestic arrangements might have at times been precarious, the account of their inner journeys is the main triumph of this book. While they witnessed the rise of anti-Semitism in Austria and the beginnings of the 1948 Czechoslovak coup d'état firsthand they also seem, though their literary work and Willa's translations from European writers like Kafka, to have been able to live in numerous countries through different appointments via a concatenation of fortuitous events. Just as they are running out of money and luck, something comes along to keep them going for a few more years - the closure of the British Council Institute in Rome leads to a

return to the UK and the offer of wardenship at Newbattle Abbey College and as that experienced difficulties Edwin was awarded the Charles Eliot Norton Poetry Professorship at Harvard University.

Of course this luck was all well-earned but it does make their life together sound physically very arduous if socially full and this is perhaps what led to Edwin's rather early death from heart failure. However, their continued collaboration and love for each other provided the succour for them to be able to persevere with their identities and lives as writers. Living by the pen has never been a particularly easy or prosperous venture and it seems to become ever more difficult. Not only does the Muirs' devotion to each other, to poetry and to new experiences come across on every page here, so too does Palmer McCulloch's love for her subjects: 'Their story has left an enduring social, political, and artistic record of what it was to live in the twentieth century, and how much it meant to share it with a loving partner'.

Edwin & Willa Muir: A Literary Marriage is published by Oxford University Press



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