

---

# FORUM

## Leslie Norris and Exile

---

JAMES PROTHERO  
SANTA ANA COLLEGE

I was appalled to find that mere months after his passing on April 6th of 2006, the Welsh poet Leslie Norris was already becoming difficult to obtain, the first step before going out of print. His poems and short stories graced major publications such as *The New Yorker* and *The Atlantic Monthly*. And yet if one checks on Amazon, his *Collected Poems* and *Collected Stories* are only to be had used, and for a much higher price. One can still purchase his books from the website of his small Welsh publisher, Seren, in pounds sterling. This last fact implies that the American market for Norris has dried up.

Somehow, to me this is monumentally ironic. Norris, who abandoned a stellar teaching career in Britain to become a poet and a teacher of writing in the American mountain west, is arguably one of the finest English language poets of the twentieth century on either side of the Atlantic. We gave the British Eliot, and in turn they gave us Norris. Critics and readers may debate, but I think we Americans got the better part of the bargain.

But perhaps a more illuminating parallel is between Norris and a poet who had a voice in many ways similar: Robert Frost. The experience that congealed Frost's poetic gift and gave it voice to the world was his temporary migration to England and his interchange of artistic friendship with Edward Thomas. Frost the poet achieved his full voice in exile. This is the quintessentially American experience of exile and coming home to a place you never knew existed before. This is the experience of our American forebears, like my own great-great grandfather who escaped the coal mines of Wales for the coal mines of Pennsylvania and wasn't content even on this side of the Atlantic until he had gone to the California Gold Rush and the Civil War.

And though all of Norris' short stories and a large percentage of his poems are set in early twentieth-century Wales, Norris' vision is essentially American. He is one of us, although I think the idea would have seemed strange to him. Yet, it was Norris' exile that gave him his voice and freed his vision. Thanks to the farsightedness and

---

financial commitment of the people at Brigham Young University, who recognized a great soul, even if he was not one of their co-religionists, Norris found a home in Orem, Utah, and produced a large volume of work which stands up with the best American poetry and short fiction of the century just completed.

Leslie Norris may have laughed at the idea of being an American in some sense, but he profoundly understood his own exile on several levels. The first and most obvious level was his distance from Wales. When I interviewed him at his home in Orem in 1999, he told me that since he had retired from BYU he was only waiting for his dogs to die before returning to Wales. He knew the difficulties of transporting animals from the US to the UK and wasn't willing to subject his dogs to the ordeal. Yet, when I called him early in 2006, he admitted that his dogs were gone, but that he had not yet made any moves toward returning to the UK. That was the last time we spoke, and some months later I was grieved to hear of his passing. But his reluctance to return spoke volumes. In the face of all of his declared intentions, he ultimately couldn't leave his home, which possessed a commanding view of the Wasatch Range to his east. He admitted that though he was not tempted to convert to Mormonism, he felt quite comfortable in their midst, and admired both the near absence of crime in his Utah home and the tolerance with which his Mormon colleagues viewed his own visits to the state liquor market.

In his finest poem, "Borders," Norris succinctly conveys all it means to be an exile and home simultaneously. On crossing a bridge as a boy in Wales that divided his industrial hometown of Merthyr Tydfil and the Breconshire mountains, Norris writes:

Did I stand on air then, invisibly  
taken to some unknown world, some nowhere?  
Where was I then? I was whole  
But felt an unseen line  
divide me, send my strong half forward,  
keep my other timidly at home.  
I have always lived that way,  
crossed borders resolutely  
while looking over my shoulder.

After these lines, he discusses a series of ostensibly rambling events. Of course, Norris was the master of appearing to ramble while going straight for his point like a hawk in a stoop. The most striking image of the poem is the moment he visits the Four Corners Monument and, like all tourists, has to lie down in four states at once, divided by borders, belonging everywhere and nowhere at once. "Restless as dust, scattered" was his powerfully brief summary. The poem, dedicated to Norris'

---

late friend, John Ormond, concludes with contemplation of “the border/ for which all others are a preparation.” Norris concludes,

...I have no answers;  
but sit in the afternoon sun, under mountains  
where stale snow clings in shadowy patches,  
remember my friend, how he had sung,  
hope he is still singing.

Upon considering this work, written in Utah and set in all the places of Norris' history, one has to admit that this is a very American poem from a Welshman.

I never had the chance to tell him, but I would if I could do it now: Leslie, you are one of us—you are as American as exile and homecoming and the wonder of being at home both everywhere and nowhere in particular. His exile began early and he left Wales to live in England before leaving England for America. He understood this sort of exile in another fashion from the experiences of his friend, Dylan Thomas, who was also at home everywhere and nowhere, restless in Wales, unable to write in London and lionized on his tours of America.

But there is a second sort of exile that Norris understood. It was about this that I came to see him. I was an American graduate student at the University of Wales, Lampeter, and part of my dissertation topic was Norris. Not only did he submit to a rather lengthy telephone interview, he invited me to stay at his house and we sat in his garden, looking up at the bare, early-summer slopes of the Wasatches and talked about poetry. It was my contention that Norris, and several other twentieth-century Welsh poets, were very thoroughly Romantic. “Neoromanticism” is the critical term. Norris confessed to my contentions freely and admitted that growing up in Welsh schools in the 1920s and '30s, he and boys of his generation had been raised to think of Wordsworth, Keats, and other Romantic poets as the standard by which poetry was measured. He admitted that he read “The Waste Land” as a Romantic document, and added, “I still do.” In the mad swirl of twentieth-century Modernism and then Postmodernism, Norris wrote of birds, landscape, virtuous and wise common folk, and the wisdom that comes from knowing oneself in the context of nature.

If there was any hint of the Postmodern in Norris' work, it was his portrayal of the sport of boxing, an apt metaphor for the planned and lethal chaos of the world wars and their aftermath. Norris soured on boxing as he grew older. As the British would say, he “gave it up as a bad job.” His masterpiece “The Ballad of Billy Rose” attacks planned violence with powerful irony, as the narrator throws coins to a sightless beggar he remembers as the boxer he saw blinded in the ring.

---

Even if it was neither conscious nor intentional, I believe that Norris gravitated to the right home in taking what he must have thought at the time was a six-month teaching post at BYU. In hindsight, it was a good move, but for Norris at the time it must have been a bold or perhaps desperate move: to go somewhere strange and new with no guarantee that he would be employed in a year, simply because it would allow him to be a poet just a little bit longer. He was married and in later middle age, and the courage of this move reflects on his passionate commitment to living the life of poetry. But in planting himself in the heart of the mountain west, Norris was also planting himself in the heart of American twentieth-century Neoromanticism. There he was writing with the same regard for the view that in nature we see a truer vision of ourselves and what we are to be. There he was writing alongside Edward Abbey, Richard Shelton, Wendell Berry, and a myriad of other nature writers both west- and east-coast who recognize that there is something larger than the cultural chaos that came in the wake of two world wars, and that the natural world is the ultimate human context despite all of our efforts to evade it.

Personally, I find myself contemplating a sit-in in the lobby of W.W. Norton until they consent to place Leslie Norris where he rightfully belongs, in their widely read anthologies. Certainly, in time, like Keats, whom Norris greatly admired, his star would rise to the heights of our appreciation and future generations will recognize the importance of his voice in our midst this just completed century. But I am not willing to wait.

I recall our conversation in the garden wandering, after an hour or two, to the subject of his friend, Dylan Thomas. Norris related a wonderful story of Thomas playing charades in a pub on the Mumbles in Swansea, of enraging the landlord when he and his friends rolled up a carpet and ran out of the pub with it in the vain attempt to convey the title, *Brothers Karamazov* (brothers carry mats off). When I asked him about Thomas' famed alcoholism and the effect of it on his writing, Norris furrowed his brow and frowned. He answered that not one of the biographies of Thomas had fairly conveyed the true man, the Dylan Thomas he had known.

The decreasing availability of Norris' work in the country of his chosen exile likewise fails to convey the man that has been one of the most profound voices of our age. Norris, as he so eloquently foresaw, has crossed his final border. I hope we do not forget him so easily as this. I, for one, will always remember him, with the gleam in his eye as his talk moved easily from Wordsworth to Keats to Thomas, sitting in his garden in the afternoon sun while the stale snow clung in shadowy patches on the Wasatches to the east of us. I am sure, somewhere, across some unknown border, he is still singing. ✱