

Dorothy Miles

Rachel Sutton-Spence, *RachelLSpence@aol.com*

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Dorothy ("Dot") Miles is a central figure in sign language poetry. There are strong arguments for claiming that she is the source of most of the sign language poetry composed and performed today. Her work and her development of the concept of sign language poetry, in conjunction with her drive to encourage sign language poetry within the Deaf Community made her a key figure in the literary heritage of sign language. For this reason, we present a short biography of her as her life and experience are relevant to poetry. The aim is to help audiences understand more about her poems (including the language she used in her poems) and the impact that her work had on sign language poetry in general. There is no other published biography of Dot Miles, although there are many biographical details in "Bright Memory", provided by Don Read, including a short essay by Dot on her early years.

She was born, hearing, on 19th August 1931 in Gwernaffield, near Mold in North Wales and became deaf at the age of eight and a half from cerebrospinal meningitis. She died on January 30th 1993 when she fell from the window of her second floor flat. The inquest at St Pancras Coroners Court concluded that she took her own life while depressed. Her manic-depressive illness, like her deafness, made her the poet that she was.

Her own autobiography (which she started before she died, although she never got beyond her very early years) tells of her love of the words and music that surrounded her as a hearing child. Her mother was an elocution teacher and Dot developed her early sense of poetic rhythm and meter from hearing her mother read poems such as *The Highwayman* as elocution passages. By the time she lost her hearing she had acquired English as her mother tongue. Although her father's family was Welsh-speaking, her first language was English. In 1980, she joked, "I like to feel that I am like Dylan Thomas. I was born in Wales but I don't know any Welsh. He and I are the same in that."¹

She spent 1940 to 1946 at the Royal School for the Deaf at Old Trafford in Manchester, where she was known not as Dorothy but number 152². From there, she went to the Mary Hare Grammar School in Newbury from 1946 to 1950. Mary Hare is Britain's only grammar school for deaf children and sign language was strongly discouraged in favour of English.

Although she had learned to sign at Manchester, her early experience as a hearing child and the prevailing attitude to sign language as something inferior to English meant that she did not identify as a sign language user. When she left school she worked in "the hearing world", spending five years as a clerical assistant in the publications and library sections of the Road Research Laboratory in Middlesex and Buckinghamshire. For the next two years she worked with deaf people, first as an assistant matron at the Richardson Home for Deaf Women in Blackburn and then as a welfare worker

¹ Poetry performance at CSUN, August 8th, 1980)

² The practice of allocating numbers to children in deaf schools was common. In her script for the BBC See Hear programme's Christmas pantomime "Aladdin" in 1986, one of her characters recognises an old friend in the pub. She addresses him by number. "Hey, remember me? You were number 28 weren't you?... I was number 61."

(then termed a "Lady Worker") with the Liverpool Benevolent Society for the Aid of the Deaf and Dumb (the Liverpool Society for the Deaf).

In the autumn of 1957, at the age of 25, she went to America to take up a place at Gallaudet College³, sponsored in part by the British Deaf and Dumb Association with the help of Alan Haythornthwaite. She was, according to a story in *The Post* on July 17th of that year, "The first English girl to win a scholarship" there. She majored in English, with a minor in psychology, but it took her a while to settle in to the College. Most of her classmates already knew each other from the pre-freshman preparatory year of the college. This class was necessary because the shortcomings of the contemporary deaf education system meant that even the intellectual cream of the nation's deaf youth frequently left school without the necessary academic skills for normal freshman entry. Dot's qualifications from Mary Hare allowed her to enter directly in to the freshman year. Three years later, she wrote a piece she intended to submit to the British Deaf Association's newsletter. She noted that Gallaudet College's aim "to educate as many people as will benefit from education... means that many deaf people who in England would have to be satisfied with trade-training, can here be prepared for a more interesting career."

Another problem for her was one of language. Although she had practised the American one-handed manual alphabet before she left England, she needed time to pick up American Sign Language. She wrote in the same piece, "Most students use the sign language extensively and there seems to be less dependence on speech and lipreading than in England. This may be partly because the American Sign Language is much more inclusive than the English one - in other words, there are signs for many small words that in England are spelled or left out or lipread."

In 1960, she became the first member of a junior class to be a member of the Gallaudet Phi Alpha Pi honour society and was in the 1961 edition of "Who's Who in American Colleges and Universities." She was student editor of "The Gallaudet Record" and editor-in-chief of the student magazine "The Buff and Blue". She won college prizes for both her prose writing and poetry, and some of her work was published in "The Silent Muse", an anthology of selected writings by deaf authors of the last 100 years. She was also involved in drama. In 1958 she won the college trophy for "Most Promising Actress". In 1959, she took the trophy for "Best Supporting Actress". And in 1960 she completed her hat-trick of progression and was awarded the trophy for "Best Actress". She graduated in 1961 receiving a BA with distinction.

After a brief return to England, she spent four more years working in America, in Michigan and Missouri, first as a teacher for "retarded deaf children" and then as a teacher and counsellor for deaf adults. Then, in 1967, she saw a performance by the newly founded National Theatre of the Deaf and immediately applied to join it.

She was especially taken by the use of sign language in the National Theatre of the Deaf. In an interview on the San Francisco Community Programme *Deaf Perspectives* in 1976, she said, "When I first saw the National Theatre of the Deaf in 1967 ... I saw what they were doing with sign language, things I had never dreamed of. And I went home and started writing poetry that combined English language and signs. That was my first real honest to goodness poetry – before that I wrote, well, just verse – and it was all so exciting for me."

³ Gallaudet College was founded in Washington DC in 1864 as a liberal arts college for deaf people. It became a university in 1981. It remains the world's only liberal arts university for deaf people.

The sign language training that she received as part of the NTD helped her to see many more possibilities in sign language, even though she disagreed with some of the things they did with signs. She felt that they sometimes used signs that were mere "demonstrations" of beautiful gestures that were too far distant from the sign language of ordinary deaf people. Dot believed that as deaf people they should never separate the signs they used from personal feelings. The NTD performed two works by Dylan Thomas – *Songs from Milk Wood* (an abbreviated version of *Under Milk Wood*), and *A Child's Christmas in Wales*. The performances were given in strongly artistic "sign-mime", with a reader providing the English words of the text. Hearing audiences loved the production of *Songs from Milk Wood*. They could appreciate the combination of signs and words because their understanding came from the English, while the signs provided a visual embellishment to the spoken words. However, deaf audiences did not understand it because the "sign-mime" that the actors used focused more on the form of signs and less on their meaning and the deaf people did not have access to the English words, which would have made it clearer. In her later workshops for aspiring sign poets, Dot emphasised the importance of understanding the nature of their audience so that the performance would suit the audience's needs and expectations. Her experience with NTD made her determined to create sign language poetry that deaf people - as well as hearing people - could appreciate. She wanted poetry that worked with English, but did not rely on English for its clarity of message. She said, in 1976, "I really believe that sign language adds something to English and the combination is richer and more exciting than English alone."

In 1975, Dot left the NTD and drove across the country to California to work with the campus service for the deaf at California State University, Northridge. While there she moved into the drama department at CSUN and was appointed to help them set up a full programme in sign language and deaf theatre. Her goal was to develop a certificate in deaf theatre, comprising three courses aimed specifically at deaf theatre and three more to give background in acting and directing. She also worked freelance as a teacher of sign language. While she was there, she met Ursula Bellugi and Edward Klima at the Salk Institute at La Jolla when they were involved in their pioneering sign language research. They were especially interested in Dot's poetry and invited her to perform some of her ASL poems for linguistic analysis. Their published results of their analysis were the first serious linguistic attempts at analysis of sign language poetry. For Dot, the experience was a huge boost to her confidence. The people at La Jolla had shown her that her sign poetry was good enough to be worthy of serious academic study.

She returned to live in England in the autumn of 1977, after twenty years in America. A diary entry on 17th July 1979 refers to her "rapidly changing world". The British Deaf community, although less politically mature than its American counterpart, was beginning to change. During that July and August, Dot was involved in the National Union of the Deaf's "Open Door" pioneering television programme (in which she performed her poem *Language for the Eye*)⁴ and was involved in subsequent meetings with the BBC to encourage them to run a regular magazine programme for deaf people⁵. She also attended a workshop involving linguists from several universities who were developing a notation system for writing BSL.

⁴ The National Union of the Deaf was a newly organised group of deaf radicals who felt that other "traditional" deaf associations were too dominated by hearing people and the church. The NUD called for deaf people to be allowed to take control of their own lives and decision-making. This was a radical suggestion in a decade that had only recently seen the change of name - amidst great acrimony - from the "British Deaf and Dumb Association" to the "British Deaf Association."

⁵ After an NUD meeting on 25th July 1979, Dot wrote in her diary, "Chairman Bill Northwood (of BBC)... dismissed sign language as not a real language (etc. etc.)" As a direct result of NUD pressure, the BBC series "See Hear!" was first broadcast in 1980 and has continued in various formats ever since.

After encouragement from friends in the Deaf community, she took work with the British Deaf Association, working on various projects including the joint BDA/Department of Health and Social Security Communication Skills project. She compiled the first teaching manual for BSL tutors⁶ and became involved in setting up the Council for the Advancement of Communication with Deaf People (CACDP). She also worked on the BDA dictionary⁷ where she provided considerable input into the description of the semantics of the BSL lexical entries. For a while she worked as a self-employed writer, lecturer and performer, becoming involved in promotion of sign language teaching and training of tutors and deaf theatre. She was involved in setting up and then teaching on the British Sign Language Tutor Training Course - the first university course for training deaf people to become BSL tutors. She also wrote the best-selling BBC book *BSL - A beginner's guide*, which was published to complement the television series.

By the early 1990s, Dot was a key figure in the British Deaf Community. In a letter to her sister, she remarked on the irony that her deafness should have been the factor that set her onto her career. She reasoned that if she had not become deaf, she should never have had the grammar school education she received at Mary Hare, she should never have had the bursary from the BDA and the scholarship to go to Gallaudet, nor would she have worked for the NTD. Had she been hearing, she said, she would have been what her mother would have called, "just another ten-a-penny tin-pot office girl".

The biographical details here have important implications for her poetry. Dot's poetic output throughout her life was not especially large, and she produced it only sporadically at certain periods. But it went through several important changes with respect to which language she composed in.

She composed poems in English, throughout her life. From the publication of a poem in the Mary Hare alumni magazine onwards, it was clear that she wanted to be a poet in the English language. Before she went to America she had some success in publishing short poems in newspapers. While she was at Gallaudet, her tutors encouraged her English poetry skills, and we have already seen that she had some publishing success in her status as a "deaf poet".

In 1976, her book *Gestures* was published. This was a selection of fifteen poems written in English (although many of them had a relationship to sign language). On her return to Britain in the late 1970s she continued to compose in English and her work was respected within the hearing disability movement as well as in the deaf world. Her great desire, however, was to be recognised as a poet without the defining epithet "deaf". She submitted work to mainstream publications and competitions and had occasional successes - most notably with *Bog Man*, which won a prize in a London poetry competition. Although she was a competent English language poet, she never achieved the recognition that she hoped for.

In 1967 and 1968, when she first joined the NTD, she translated some of her English work into ASL and some of it formed the film that accompanied the book *Gestures*. Translation from English poetry into ASL was not radical in itself. There was already a tradition of sign translations of English poems and of signing hymns within church services for deaf people. The way she approached her translations, however, was novel, as she recognised the poetic principles that would create good sign language translations of English poems. Importantly, she also experimented with her own idea of composing poems in both English and ASL simultaneously. Like so many pioneers in any field, however, Dot found that no one appeared to appreciate her breakthrough at that time. In 1968 no one

⁶ BSL: A manual for Teachers. British Deaf Association, Carlisle, 1981

⁷ This was later completed under the management of the Deaf Studies Unit at Durham University, under the editorship of David Brien, and published in 1992.

else was particularly excited by her "original" sign language poetry, so she went back to composing in English for the next five years.

Dot knew English and knew a lot about English poetry. She was also a fluent ASL user and had experience of using sign language as an aesthetic art form from her time at NTD. This put her in a unique position to develop a clear understanding of sign poetry principles. She explained later, "To look at spoken poetry, first look at spoken language. To look at signed poetry, first look at sign language". In a television interview in 1975 she said, " I am trying ... to find ways to use sign language according to the principles of spoken poetry. For example, instead of rhymes like "cat" and "hat", I might use signs like WRONG and WHY, with the same final handshape"⁸.

Describing her poetry composition in 1975, she said, "One of the things I am trying to do is write poetry that sounds fine in English but also at the same time it looks right and feels right as it is being signed in the same order as the words." This activity - so obviously a possibility to us now with hindsight - was a radical departure from anything that anyone had done before. Original composition of ASL poetry was simply unknown.

In the interview with *Deaf Perspectives* in 1976, she commented on some of her poems that "were written specifically for sign language. That is to say that they were written so that they could combine English language and sign language together. Because I grew up as a hearing person I remember English as my first language and a combination of the two I find is a very strong way of expressing myself." She added, "sign language combined with spoken English is my normal way of communicating so as an honest poet I feel more comfortable using both."

There was a further reason for the joint composition, however, which was perhaps a legacy from her time at the NTD where the company performed before deaf and hearing audiences. She wanted to demonstrate sign language - its beauty, range and capabilities - to hearing people. She told Greg Brooks, " I am trying to ... write poems that explain sign language to hearing people in an interesting way. [*Language for the Eye*] was really written for hearing children to show them some of the fun things you can do with sign language."

The poems that appeared in *Gestures* and formed part of her repertoire for poetry performances were composed in different ways. At a live performance in California in 1980, she summarised some of the mixed heritage of her poems in *Gestures*:

"Some of the poems ... I wrote originally for English. I never thought of signing them. That includes *The Dance* ... [*Exaltation*] ... also [*Cloud Magic*]. But apparently I have a visual writing skill. But there were a few poems that were written specifically to show sign language – *The Gesture* was written to show sign language to hearing people. Also, *Language for the Eye* was written to give sign language the chance to work. ... But a number of those poems were written interlinking the two languages. I thought of a way of signing it and then how to write it almost at the same time. I couldn't say which happened first...They just fit together ... and it all dropped into place. There's no one way that things happen. Sometimes they happen one way and sometimes another."

After her return to England in 1977, she translated some of her ASL poems into British Sign Language. However, she was very much an American on her return to England and it took her a while to discover the poetic potential of BSL. When she had left England, in 1957 she had no in-

⁸ In this case, a Y handshape. The interview was with Greg Brooks on "Deaf Focus" an award-winning Theta Cable special, Los Angeles, 1975.

depth understanding of - or high regard for - any sign language. Her linguistic appreciation of sign language had developed entirely within the framework of ASL. During her return visit to California in 1980, she remarked, "I've already translated a number of my poems in BSL but ... there is very little difference between the two languages."

As she settled into the British Deaf community, she began to compose poetry again. Although she continued to write English poetry, and poetry that "worked" in both BSL and English, she also composed BSL poetry with no reference to English. Freed from the constraints of needing to accommodate two languages, her BSL poetry rose to new heights and arguably some of her finest sign language poems, such as *Trio*, are from these later years. The themes of her poetry also changed. They became more overtly political - especially from the point of "deaf politics" - and rather darker and angrier.

Her work laid the foundations for modern sign language poetry on both sides of the Atlantic. The poem *Trio* annotated on the ECHO pages here shows how her composition was moving away from English and becoming more "pure" BSL. Other poets, such as Paul Scott (whose poems *Three Queens* and *Five Senses* are also shown here) are creating their own independent work within the framework established by Dot Miles.