

Barbara Robertson: An Australian artist's life

Lorraine McLoughlin

Non-fiction

RRP \$49.50

www.robertsonbiography.com

Reviewed by Dominique Wilson

Artist Barbara Robertson grew up in Adelaide in the 1920s. Under the encouragement and guidance of her photographer father, Eric Robertson, she began drawing and painting while still in primary school, and soon developed an understanding of tone, and the uses of light and shade. By observing her father in his studio, she also quickly recognised the importance of capturing the character behind a face—an ability that would be reflected in many of the portraits she painted later in life. She studied under Ivor Hele at the Adelaide School of Arts and Crafts and later gained patronage that enabled her to study in Melbourne at the National Gallery of Victoria Art School under William Dargie. In the 1940s and fifties she had established a reputation as a skilled portrait and social realist painter, and exhibited both nationally and in London. After teaching for more than twenty years at Adelaide Girls High School, Robertson took early retirement in the seventies to concentrate once more on her art, adding religious and animal themes to her range. She has been hung twice in the Archibald and Sulman prizes, as well as in the national Melrose and Blake competitions. Though often underestimated in the earlier part of her life, Robertson's art is gaining increasing recognition.

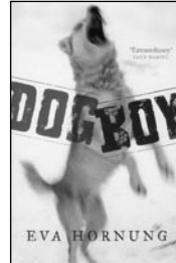
In *Barbara Robertson: An Australian artist's life*, McLoughlin meticulously and sensitively explores this Australian artist's life to reveal a gentle, humble woman of great integrity. The author's respect and admiration for this artist is evident in her thoughtful analysis of Robertson's work and her interpretation of the information she gathered.

This is a beautiful book. Accompanying the main text is an abundance of Robertson's personal photographs, sketches and coloured representations of her art, as well as a generous number of boxed texts complementing the information in the body of the work. Tracey Lock-Weir, Curator of Australian Painting and Sculpture at the Art Gallery of South Australia, has written a foreword to the book.

Supplementary to this book is a DVD that comprises interviews of Barbara Robertson by the author and artists Peter Fitzgerald and Mark Pearse, recorded during several sessions in 2008 and 2009. These interviews are a pleasure to watch, for as Robertson

talks of her influences, her paintings and her life, her personality and beliefs shine through to reveal more of the person than is possible to describe in words. There is also a catalogue-in-progress of some of the artist's works included on the DVD.

Barbara Robertson: An Australian artist's life is a must-have for anyone interested in art in general, and more specifically in Australian art and/or women artists.



Dog boy

Eva Hornung

Fiction, Text Publishing

RRP \$32.95

Reviewed by Dominique Wilson

Romochka is four years old when abandoned by his uncle in an apartment in Moscow at the onset of winter. Hunger soon drives him outdoors, where he follows a pack of dogs to its lair in a basement under an abandoned church:

And so it was, trotting with three dogs through ordinary lanes, past ordinary tenements, past ordinary lives, a lone boy crossed a border that is, usually, impassable—not even imaginable.

But imagining the life of a boy raised by dogs is what Hornung has done. Legends of children brought up by animals are, of course, not new, and there have been occasional news reports that tell of children—like the Russian girl Ramzia Tukmatullina—who have been abandoned by their family and managed to survive by joining a pack of dogs. But unlike in fables, where these children are often given pure, uncorrupted qualities, as if being brought up by animals has protected them from human failings, Hornung's Romochka is very much an ordinary little boy in extraordinary circumstances.

Hornung has resisted any tendency to attribute animal characteristics to Romochka, and as the boy adapts to his new environment, his behaviour is totally believable. So too is the behaviour of the dogs—there is no sentimentality here, and the primacy of the pack over that of the individual is a lesson Romochka has to learn early to survive.

While this book may appear to be a departure from the themes of her previous novels, where Hornung [as Sallis] focused on the experiences of migrants and refugees, *Dog boy* supplements Hornung's previous insightful examinations of what it is to be an out-



What Marian Drew never told me about light

Nathan Shepherdson

Poetry, Small Change Press

RRP \$15.00

Reviewed by Cameron Fuller

Shepherdson's *What Marian Drew never told me about light* is impressively designed. A poetic response to the remarkable work of the photographer Marian Drew (and featuring one of her striking images on the front cover), the book illuminates the relation between poetry and the visual arts.

Knowledge about Drew's art might enhance the reading experience; however, it's not necessary for appreciating Shepherdson's poetry. Throughout the twenty-six pages of this single, book-length poem, his intelligence and imagination take flight. Interspersed with quotations of Drew's own words about her work and her processes, which Shepherdson builds into its structure, the poem appears to be the result of an interplay between structure and planned spontaneity.

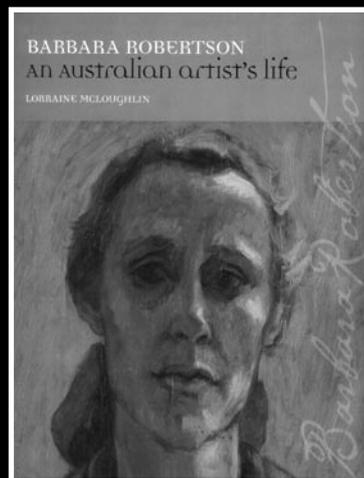
Moving through a range of linguistic forms and shapes, particularly by repetition and fragmentation, the poem explores the phenomenon of light. Light being crucial to the perception of objects and visual imagery, Shepherdson examines its effects in language, at times treating it as a tangible, physical entity:

i have learned how to fillet light

look at the way
it sits behind the words
in this sentence
(p10)

Throughout, Shepherdson's writing is philosophical, humorous and surreal. He presents striking images and almost aphoristic lines, such as: 'the herds of shadows / at the corners of my eyes / just stopped drinking' (p5); and 'I teach fish to swim / by nailing them to a wall' (p26). His imaginative wordplay, however, is not always successful: puns such as 'we holed our breath ... we are helled in the breath' (p18) are more distracting than engaging. Despite this, his willingness to take risks pays rich dividends.

In winning several poetry awards, Shepherdson has demonstrated his immense talents. In this book, he shows further that he is a highly imaginative and adventurous poet.



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“The previously little-known details of Robertson's captivating years as an artist, teacher and activist have for the first time been meticulously pieced together by McLoughlin.”

[Tracey Lock-Weir, Curator of Australian Paintings and Sculpture,
Art Gallery of South Australia]

This 100 page full-colour art book and biography sets Robertson in a historical and social context. The book includes a DVD of Robertson interviews and a catalogue-in-progress of the artist's work.

Copies can be ordered from
www.robertsonbiography.com