Transcript
Dead Ladies Show Podcast Episode 34
Willa Muir

(Dead Ladies Show Music - 'Little Lily Swing' by Tri-Tachyon)

SUSAN STONE: Welcome to the Dead Ladies Show Podcast, I'm Susan Stone.

The Dead Ladies Show celebrates women — both overlooked and iconic — who achieved amazing things against all odds while they were alive. And we do it through women's history storytelling on stage - here in Berlin and beyond.

We're still mostly staying home, but through the magic of podcasting, you can travel with us! In this episode, we'll be going to Muenster, in the second of our two-part series recorded live at the Burg Hülshoff Centre for Literature's Haus Rüschhaus.

Dead Ladies Show co-founder Florian Duijsens joins me more or less. He's here with me in Berlin remotely from his charming apartment. Hey there, Florian!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Hi Susan! I'm coming to you live from my closet, surrounded by linens.

SUSAN STONE: The best way to be. So in our last episode, we heard you talk about Dorothy L. Sayers, the wonderful crime Queen and translator. Let's remind everybody about the special theme of our show in Münster.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Yeah, we were invited by the Burg Hülshoff Centre for Literature, and by the Toledo program, which works on cultural exchange by and for literary translators, which is an issue very close to our hearts as at least Katy and I work as translators, Katy slightly more seriously than me. And so we put together a show for them all about Dead Lady translators. We had Dorothy Sayers, the subject of the last episode, and Malinche, who was the interpreter for Cortez when he was in Mexico for the first time. Complicated woman, that one.

SUSAN STONE: Yeah, complicated story, too, and it's fantastic. It was presented in German, so hopefully we'll be able to do a German podcast with that in the future.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: And there was a song!

SUSAN STONE: There was song they were singing. Yeah, yeah, it was cool. It was great. It was very fun to be invited. We had a warm welcome from Jörg Albrecht and his team. And from the event, we're now going to hear from our other co-founder Katy Derbyshire introducing us to the translator Willa Muir.

KATY DERBYSHIRE ON TAPE FROM HAUS RÜSCHHAUS: I'm going to be talking about Willa Muir. And here she is, painted in 1944 by the Edinburgh artist Nigel McIsaac. As you can see she's sitting at a typewriter, smoking a cigarette, books in the background, a grumpy expression, what could her job possibly be? (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

She was the first English translator of Kafka. She was also a feminist of her own personal brand, and we'll hear more about that later, and a modernist writer. She

was born Wilhemina Johnston Anderson in 1890 in Montrose, which is up there where a little red dot is, on the Northeast coast of Scotland.

But both her parents came from here. Shetland, it's right up a long way north of Scotland, it's a group of islands and they spoke their Shetland dialect at home. Now that dialect is for the linguists in the room, it is a kind of old Scots, which is related to Middle English with a strong Norse influence because that used to belong to I think the Norwegians or — I have forgotten.

I'm gonna play you a little sample. You may not understand it, but it sounds beautiful. And this is the only woman I could find talking on the website Shetland ForWirds, which kind of preserves the dialect. So she's from the next island down. They come from this very top island called Unst, and she's from the next Island over, called Yell. Nobody knows where that word comes from. So let's listen to her. It gets easier as you go along.

TAPE OF WOMAN WITH SHETLAND ACCENT: I'm Mary Ellen Odie, and I come from the South Part of Yell. I was born and brought up in East Yell, and I speak the way they do but I had no alternative! They'd have killed me if I spoke (unintelligible). I wouldn't have done that, that would've been a terrible crime against Yell. (unintelligible) But it didn't penetrate because I didn't like the school, I didn't like the teacher even, I thought she didn't even ken very much. Had bairns arguing with her.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I'm not understanding all of this!

TAPE OF WOMAN WITH SHETLAND ACCENT: But I learnt me English through the wireless. There's no doubt about that at all. And there were a lot of things that to attract bairns in the 40s. And then when I grew up a bit there was Dick Barton, Special Agent — I would rush in from playing outside to hear that, Dick Barton and Snowy. So that's where I learned my English with a Shetland accent.

KATY DERBYSHIRE: I understand that last sentence the best. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) So back to Willa. You can imagine that this is what she sounded like as a child — with a higher voice probably. She grew up trilingual, in fact, speaking Shetland at home, like we just heard, Scots on the streets roundabout in the house, and a Scottish kind of English at her private school that she went to. So, standard English was kind of imposed on her. It wasn't her native language, if you like.

Willa became a talented student. She got a scholarship as a child to Montrose Academy, where she learned Latin, Greek, French, English and science, and that was the first step away from her modest background, really. She then got a bursary to St. Andrews University, where we see her here. She graduated with a first class degree in classics, so using that Latin and Greek, in 1911, followed by a year scholarship to study English literature. And as a student, she was active in the women's debating society, and on the editorial board of the university magazine, which is what this photo is of.

Strange - it's weird to see a literary magazine with so many men on the editorial board. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) It was called College Echoes. Now, where I found this photo it said that that's her at the back, but I suspect it's actually her in the front row because she looks more like she does in this photo. Anyway, so while she was at university, Willa fell in love with a rugby-playing medical student (AUDIENCE

LAUGHS) and turned down the opportunity of a research scholarship at the British school in Rome, so as to get engaged to him.

When World War I broke out, she briefly went to the lecturer at the university while the men were away, but then moved to London to study psychology. She found out that the rugby player had cheated on her while she was in England, and dramatically threw her engagement ring in the sea. Later on, as we'll find out, she became more forgiving of infidelities in more ways than one.

So, in London she was working then in this rather nice building, which was the Gypsy Hill Teacher Training College, teaching women how to be teachers. She was vice principal there, from 1918 until 1919, taught English psychology and education, but then married this guy here, Edwin Muir, who was a promising poet from Orkney.

This is an artifact from the archives of that Teacher Training College. They look very happy together. It is — this is how we did it in the olden days. Somebody has written on the card 'Mrs. Edwin Muir, English Lecturer 1918 to 19,' so she kind of lost her name.

So Edwin, he came from Orkney, which is another little group of islands off the top of Scotland, slightly further down. They spoke — they speak, a sort of slightly similar dialect, but Edwin's family moved away. They were farmers, they moved to Glasgow when he was two. So he and Willa had a lot in common, sort of linguistically as well. So they moved to Europe after Edwin got a freelance writing job, what do you do? You move to Prague! Where Willa learned Czech.

And she did her first translation outside of the university, a play by — excuse my Czech — Karel Čapek. And then they moved on to Dresden, where they were waiting at a bus — a tram stop, not a bus stop. And they ran into Willa's old University friend A.S. Neil, who was an educationalist, that was around 1920. He was setting up an international school on kind of progressive principles in Hellerau, still exists, you can get a grant to stay there, if you are a writer or a translator. And Willa joined the staff. She said, "And that's how I learned German. That's how Edwin learned German when you were sitting at meals and you have to ask for a thing in German or not get it? You asked for it in German! And I was teaching in German, so Germany was, anyhow, everywhere. And we went down at night to the local pub, and sang popular songs and danced. We were all very happy there."

Maybe not all of the time, because it was in Hellerau that Edwin had a brief affair with a student. He later wrote about it in his autobiography, which made her very angry. I mean, she knew at the time, but the writing about it, making it public, was difficult for her. But she then herself described it as "important in our marriage, helping it to become a more conscious partnership." In 1923, the economy was on the downturn, so they moved on to Italy and Salzburg. In Scotland, France, England, Orkney, St. Andrews, and so on and so on. They were always moving around, very rarely settled for the rest of their lives. They've been described as Bohemians. But actually, they didn't quite fit in with English literary society. They were much mocked by other writers for being too Scottish, too working class. And their relationship was not quite what was expected in terms of gender roles.

They began translating to make a living while in Europe, they started with three plays by Gerhard Hauptmann. And their first published translation was this book,

Power by Lion Feuchtwanger, published in 1926. Willa didn't actually like Feuchtwanger's writing. She thought it was a real chore to translate. And so they put this first book out, and then their son Gavin was born in 1927. I'm going to show you a slightly racier cover, which will help you as German readers to understand which book it was. There we are. Jud Süss, apparently the story of dancing girls, glamour girls who are really into this guy with a powdered wig or something. Not quite sure what they're trying to tell us there. And the couple also translated to English Heinrich Mann, Hermann Broch, and Yiddish writer Sholem Asch.

So they used then, having been established in publishing, they used their influence to get Kafka's *The Castle*, published by Sacker in 1930.

That was followed by *The Trial* in 1937. *Amerika* in 1946, and *The Penal Colony: Stories and Short Pieces* in 1948. So you'll notice if you were listening very carefully, there was a bit of a break in the middle. During the war, Anglophone readers did not want to read anything from German. And after the Nazis, Willa felt quite alienated from German as a language, she stopped translating with one exception and that was Kafka.

Before that, though, before she stopped, she gave us an opportunity for two absolute stonking bonus Dead Ladies. She translated under a pseudonym on her own, under the name Agnes Neil Scott, various things including two novels by this woman here, Krista Winslow, who I had never heard of, and now I'm glad I have, because she was an openly lesbian sculptor and writer in the 30s. She wrote *Das Mädchen Manuela — The Child Manuela —* which was made into various films including one wit bonus Dead Lady number two, Romy Schneider. So I think that Willa's translation was republished. I don't know why she didn't want to do that under her own name, we will probably never know.

So when they translated together, both their names were listed as translators, although as you'll notice from this very pretty title page from *The Trial*, they weren't listed on the title page, they were listed somewhere or other in the book. And on Amazon, you'll find they're listed as merely 'Edwin Muir,' not that we would buy anything there anyway. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

Critics often assumed that Willa did the rough work, and Edwin being a poet, did the more prestigious fine tuning, which is a weird way to imagine translation work, but hey, and he did write the introductions to their translations. So in a way he was claiming dominion over their interpretation I think.

In her memoir that she wrote after Edwin died, Willa claimed that they tore Kafka's books in half to work on them. But actually in before that in August 1953, she wrote in her journal: "And the fact remains; I am a better translator than he is. The whole current of patriarchal society is set against this fact, however, and sweeps it into oblivion, simply because I did not insist on shouting aloud: 'Most of this translation, especially Kafka, has been done by ME. Edwin only helped'. And every time Edwin was referred to as THE translator, I was too proud to say anything; and Edwin himself felt it would be undignified to speak up, I suppose. I am left without a shred of literary reputation. And I am ashamed of the fact that I feel it as a grievance…And yet, and yet, I want to be acknowledged." And I'm really pleased that actually these days she is acknowledged.

So we can imagine Willa, here she is in this delightful family scene on the sofa with the cat, the husband and the son. We can imagine how slogging away at translation and domestic duties longing to write, while her husband worked on unprofitable poetry in the attic, not that I'm suggesting poetry should be profitable. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) And she outlined that fairly clearly in her unpublished novel, *Mrs. Muttoe and the Top Story*, which those who have read it say was unpublished for good reason. In a 1933 letter she wrote, “How do we live? Translating from the German, reading German books for publishers, doing anything that turns up. How do we want to live? On the proceeds of our own creative work. Apparently quite impossible.” I think it's sad, personally, that she didn't see translation as creative work. I certainly do. But she did later on, give it up. So, hey.

Willa worked all hours of the day and the night which led to her having a breakdown in 1941. Edwin's biographer Peter Butter, wrote— as actually this was as late as 1990 — “her greatest work I think she would gladly agree was to make possible the production of his poetry.” (AUDIENCE GROANS) I was expecting more groans! (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

The thing is though, she often did agree. Published by Leonard and Virginia Woolf’s Hogarth pPress in 1928, her essay, *Women: an Inquiry* is blurbed, as you can see here in the American edition, “Are the highest spiritual capacities of men and women antagonistic or complimentary? Mrs. Muir answers this question with charm, dignity, warmth and brilliance.” Quote “If the average man sees woman alternately as an angel and a devil it is because she exercises both the creative and destructive influence upon his entire life.” Unquote. Here comes my favorite part — not. “To eliminate the destructive element we must recognize in what field each sex is better suited to perform. With facts as a basis for her premises and a method of condensed crystal clear logic, the author reaches a system of conclusions, which no future psychologists of women or men can afford to ignore.” I beg to differ. Anyway, so that was Willa’s brand of feminism, I think we would probably call it essentialist now.

After the war, Edwin became the director of the British Council Institute in Prague. Willow taught a Czech choir there to sing Scottish songs in Gaelic. She was a great diary writer, and she kept a journal that you can see the cover of here, detailing the young writers they met and invited home, and also the Communist Putsch of 1948. She would write her diaries in poetry and prose and reportage. And in 1952, she wrote one other unpublished novel called *The Usurpers*, kind of exploring those experiences a bit further. Edwin refused to read it.

Willa’s own writing explored women's lives in Scotland, and it's now thankfully been rediscovered and recognized as an important contribution to Scottish modernism. Two novels were published during her lifetime, *Imagined Corners* and *Mrs. Ritchie* about kind of domestic issues. And she also published poetry and nonfiction. Then came that memoir that I mentioned earlier. It's called *Belonging* and it was focused very closely on her marriage to Edwin, as you can see from the title facing page, which is a beautiful picture actually, but it's in her own memoir, a picture of Edwin Muir, age 17.

The title is actually quite important. I think she, she found a sense of belonging in the person of Edwin rather than any particular place, and in return she protected

him. “He was a soft shell crab,” she wrote shortly before his death, “and I was his carapace.” She had such a beautiful way with words.

Willa Muir loved her husband dearly, and she chose to be a devoted wife at the expense of her own work, despite believing in her own brand of feminism.

An acquaintance Mary McLean wrote, “the Muirs rose late, and kept late evening hours, but they liked to rest in bed in the afternoon since neither of them enjoyed robust health. If disturbed, they would both come to the door like two sleepy children, Willa in her pink flannel nightdress and Edwin with a silk coat over his pyjamas.”

The Scottish writer George Mackay Brown noted Edwin was not a brilliant conversationalist. I don't want to put him down. Much. (AUDIENCE LAUGHS) Unlike Willa, who he called “a marvelous talker brimming with wit and gaiety,” and Mackay Brown thought she was a marvelous host full of “gaiety, humor and kindness.” So she was marvelously full of gaiety! (AUDIENCE LAUGHS)

She brought key German writers into English for the very first time. And she also incidentally helped Hermann Broch to escape Austria for Britain.

Her translations have since been criticized for being overly domesticating, as we call it in English. Two things here. First of all, it's very easy to pick holes in translations. And, especially if you really wish you had done that translation yourself, which with Kafka is really a given.

And second of all, she did know what she was doing. It was something that the market demanded. After their very Englishified translation of Jud Süss, which was a huge success, the Muirs tried to be more faithful to the German in the next book. She wrote in 1968, “In one sense it was a good translation, but it was not destined to be a popular success. The British public, presented with authentic Feuchtwanger, did not take to him.”

She used all these exciting word choices, sometimes reflecting her Scottish background. And she had a great sense of rhythm and did really notice Kafka’s subtle humor; she had her own sense of humor too.

As a perpetual outsider, she related I think to Kafka particularly well, I'd like to read her opening to *Metamorphosis*, thinking as I read it of Willa, plagued with arthritis, waking up one morning to find that pink nightdress gone.

“As Gregor Samsa awoke one morning from uneasy dreams he found himself transformed in his bed into a gigantic insect. He was lying on his hard, as it were armour-plated, back and when he lifted his head a little he could see his dome-like brown belly divided into stiff arched segments on top of which the bed-quilt could hardly keep in position and was about to slide off completely. His numerous legs, which were pitifully thin compared to the rest of his bulk, waved helplessly before his eyes.

What has happened to me? he thought. It was no dream. His room, a regular human bedroom, only rather too small, lay quiet between the four familiar walls. Above the table on which a collection of cloth samples was unpacked and spread out – Samsa

was a commercial traveller – hung the picture which he had recently cut out of an illustrated magazine and put into a pretty gilt frame. It showed a lady, with a fur cap on and a fur stole, sitting upright and holding out to the spectator a huge fur muff, into which the whole of her forearm had vanished.

Gregor's eyes turned next to the window, and the overcast sky – one could hear raindrops beating on the window gutter – made him quite melancholy. What about sleeping a little longer and forgetting all this nonsense, he thought, but it could not be done, for he was accustomed to sleep on his right side and in his present condition he could not turn himself over. However violently he forced himself towards his right side he always rolled onto his back again. He tried it at least a hundred times, shutting his eyes to keep from seeing his struggling legs, and only desisted when he began to feel in his side a faint dull ache he had never experienced before."

Thank you very much.

(APPLAUSE FROM AUDIENCE)

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Katy Derbyshire on Willa Muir, recorded live by Brigitte Hamar. As Katy said, Willa was instrumental in translating many important German writers for the first time. One that she mentioned who might not be very well-known outside of Germany is Lion Feuchtwanger. He was a very early critic of the Nazis, a Jewish writer in 1925, I believe he published this book that Katy mentioned called Jud Süss, which is a book about a so-called court Jew, which is a horrible concept from the 18th century, when European royals, because of their religion — Catholicism — weren't allowed to do certain money things. So they hired a Jew, and like, they gave them certain rights and even aristocratic titles, in exchange for their help. And that went horribly wrong in this particular case that this book is inspired by. But what went more wrong later on was then the Nazis appropriated this book by a Jewish writer to make literally the world's most anti-semitic film ever, produced by Joseph Goebbels, also called Jud Süss. So that's a horrible legacy that Germany is full of.

SUSAN STONE: Yes, it's a it's a true story of Joseph Süss Oppenheimer, as you say, and it was a popular subject, like many historical subjects. So there were there were plays written about it. There were books and novellas written about it. And then there was a rather unfortunate film made about it that was pure propaganda. And that one, as far as I know, is sourced from one of the other plays, but certainly it has the name of Feuchtwanger's book, and the subject matter. And so that's another layer of problematic for the whole, for the whole story.

A lot of German writers from that era and others aren't that well-known outside of Germany, and we're going to talk about another one, Annette von Droste-Hülshoff. Now, that might sound a little familiar because we have been saying some of those words, and it's because she gave her name to the Burg Hülshoff Centre for Literature. We also recorded our show in Haus Rüschhaus, which used to be her house.

Droste-Hülshoff was a 19th century poet, composer, and a lover of women who wrote what's considered by some to be one of the first murder mysteries as well as an early example of Gothic fiction. It's called the *Die Judenbuche*, or *The Jew's*

Beech. B-E-E-C-H like the tree, not like the sandy place. So another problematic title, at least for modern ears. And like Feuchtwanger's book, this novella gives us some insight to the anti-semitism of the time. And she also gives her name to something else.

AUDIO CLIP MUSIC AND VOICE: Droste Frequenzmodulation

SUSAN STONE: This is Droste FM a project of the creative community group Leseburger*innen at the Burg-Hülshoff Center for Literature. We met some of the team during our visit to Münster.

DOMINIK RENNEKE IN TAPED SEGMENT: Hey, I'm Dominik, and I'm the coordinator of the Leseburger*innen, the Reading Citizens.

ANDREA: My name is Andrea, and I'm one of those. (LAUGHS)

DOMINIK RENNEKE: The group is a part of our Center for Literature, and they make events for our events. And yeah, maybe Andrea can tell you which events we do.

ANDREA: We have visiting festivals on Burg-Hülshoff, or readings, or any kind of performances. And then we talk about that. We make interviews, and we make little tasks for our radio station. You can see and hear them on the website of the Center for Literature.

CLAUDIA: I'm Claudia and I'm also a Leseburgerin. I thought it was very interesting, just to have normal people like ourselves and having the opportunity to participate in cultural readings or festivals.

SUSAN STONE: Andrea, does Annette von Droste have a resonance for you, the woman whose name is behind the organization?

ANDREA: She was actually always important for me. I began with it in school, we read poems. Later at university, I was reading her poem cycle about the whole year. And actually, as I was a teacher, I made one of my exam lessons about a very famous novel from her called *Die Judenbuche.* So I always was reading her all the time. And I was very surprised that the Leseburger*innen community does so much art which is very modern, and very new. And we don't read Annette Droste-Hülshoff very often, so that is even more interesting for me.

SUSAN STONE: The yearly Droste Festival inspired by the namesake writer is going on as we speak in June 2020, and it's digital this time - so go check it out. The title concept this year is Believe (in Us), and the festival events explore questions about doubt and truth, religion and art, and more. It is primarily in German, but there is also an excellent Spotify playlist for the festival that everyone can enjoy, so we'll link to that.

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: The Lesebürger*innen also created an audio feature about us, it's in German, and we'll have a link for you in the show notes. We'll also have some lovely pictures of Willa Muir and links to learn more about her translations and writing, as well as a link to a 1963 recording of her talking about her husband Edwin Muir and their work and life together. That's all on our website

deadladiesshow.com/podcast, or visit our social media channels @deadladiesshow for more extras.

SUSAN STONE: Our jaunty theme song is Little Lily Swing by Tri-Tachyon. The Dead Ladies Show was founded by Florian Duijsens and Katy Derbyshire. The podcast is created, produced, and edited by me.

If you'd like to support our podcast and our ongoing transcripts project, we have a Patreon with some extras and exclusives, and you can find it at patreon.com/deadladiesshowpodcast. I'd like to give a warm welcome and thank you to our newest patron, Rosalee Edwards. Yay!

SUSAN STONE: Thank you Florian!

FLORIAN DUIJSENS: Thank you, Susan.

SUSAN STONE: Thanks to Katy, and thank you to everybody listening. I'm Susan Stone. Bye from Berlin. Be well!

KATY DERBYSHIRE ON TAPE READING CREDIT: Support for this episode of The Dead Ladies Show Podcast comes from the Burg Hülshoff Center for Literature.

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