

THIS AND THAT: William Gratwick

By Dale Davis

Linwood, New York, (Post Office, Pavilion, New York), thirty-five miles southwest of Rochester, fifty-five miles due east of Buffalo, fourteen miles east of Avon, in Livingston County, the Genesee Valley.

My father (William Henry Gratwick, Jr., 1870- 1934) selected this land we live on during the year 1899 by taking two-hour trips from Buffalo on the milktrains of all the railroads leaving the city. He looked out of the window on one side going out, and the other coming back.

On the day he traveled the Lackawanna he noticed after about fifty miles that the landscape began to look promising. So he got off the train, walked up the sloping fields to a ridge, ate his picnic lunch in the doorway of an old barn overlooking the entire Genesee Valley, and realized that here was the place he been looking for.

He bought this farm on the York-Pavilion Road, Livingston County, and three adjoining farms, about 350 acres in all. The family started living here in 1900 and as been living here ever since.

William Gratwick, My, This Must Have Been a Beautiful Place When It Was Kept Up, As Documented in the Year 1965.

"Bill, why is there a new bridge in the garden," I asked on a fall afternoon in 1983. "Cross it and see if you know the answer," Bill replied. I did. As I crossed the new bridge Bill had placed in the Italian Garden and looked out, I was surrounded by a panorama of the Genesee Valley. I knew.

Linwood was built in 1900 as the summer estate of William Henry Gratwick, Jr., a Harvard-trained architect, who climbed the hill and looked at the view. Thomas A. Fox of Boston, a close friend of John Singer Sargent http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Singer_Sargent, designed the gardens and grounds at Linwood, including the Italian Garden http://www.linwoodgardens.org/Garden_Tour.html

*Now her son has taken up her
old ideas formally
shut out*

*by high walls from the sheep run.
It is a scene from Comus
transported*

to upper New York State.

From William Carlos Williams, "The Italian Garden"

This is not a history of Linwood <http://www.linwoodgardens.org/Home.html>. Linwood was listed in the National Register of Historic Places in 1997. There is a history available, completed in 2008 http://www.esf.edu/cclp/documents/Two_Gardens_and_View.pdf. This is, also, not a biography of Bill Gratwick. He is the author of two books documenting his life: *My, This Must Have Been a Beautiful Place When It Was kept Up, As Documented in 1965* and *The Truth Tall Tales and Blatant Lies* <http://www.amazon.com/s?rh=i%3Aaps%2Ck%3AThe+truth%5Cc+tall+tales%5Cc+and+blatant+lies&keywords=The+truth%2C+tall+tales%2C+and+blatant+lies&ie=UTF8&psrk=the+truth+tall+tales+and+blatant+liesand>. This is also not a scholarly examination of William Carlos Williams in Western New York. Emily Mitchell Wallace has written a thorough study (Emily Mitchell Wallace. "Musing in the Highlands and Valleys: The Poetry of Gratwick Farm." *William Carlos Williams Review* 8, no. 1, Spring 1982).

Bill Gratwick (William Henry Gratwick III, 1903- 1988) was not a footnote. He was a Harvard graduate (A.B. in History 1926, Master's in Landscape Architecture, 1929) sculptor, librettist, author, horticulturalist, landscape architect, breeder of horses and sheep, photographer, filmmaker, and hybridizer of tree peonies (with Hamilton College Professor A. P. Saunders and artist Nassos Daphnis <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/13/arts/design/13daphnis.html>).

His was the art of surprise, of delight, of exuberance. He gave himself everywhere, from the paths he mowed that took the eyes down the unexpected, to the installations he created just waiting to be photographed. His was the art of seeing and sharing that vision, a gift he generously gave. There has never been a group exhibition of the work of the photographers who photographed at Linwood. The photographers include Ansel Adams; Walter Chappell; Phillip Elliott; Joan Lyons; Beaumont Newhall; Minor White; and Charles Arnold, Professor of Photography R.I.T., and his many, many students.

Come I will delight you and yet Bill's was a subtle gift.

William Carlos Williams wrote in *The Autobiography*, "Bill, whose genius for the impromptu is never at a loss for expression." Bill Gratwick's art was the moment.

These are a few of the moments Bill Gratwick gave to me.

The first time I visited Linwood I brought every reference to William Carlos Williams and the place and its inhabitants as part of me. At the sight of Bill's place and Tree Peonies in bloom I shed all references and looked and looked and looked.

Tree Peonies are native to western China and parts of Tibet. The Chinese collected them for centuries, almost eliminating them from the wild, for planting in the gardens of the imperial palace and temples. These plants were so revered that the rulers declared that only persons of great wealth or high position were of sufficient stature to grow them, a way which continued for generations.

Europeans first became aware the Moutans through Chinese art collected by early traders and importers, but the spectacular plants were written off, at that time, as products of artists' imagination.

Michael Dodge. "Tree Peonies, Carrying on an Age-Old Tradition, American Breeders are Improving the King of Flowers." Horticulture, August 1978, pps. 37-38.

The arrival of Tree Peonies to Pavilion, New York is well documented in both of Bill's books.

My first response to both Bill and to his place was not to have one question. Questions were unnecessary; there was only to look, to see, to experience. Art was everywhere, Tree Peonies in bloom, every corner, everywhere. The fountain on arrival announced entering a place unlike no other, a place created for arrival.

Someone once asked Bill why all his work on Tree Peonies when it took a generation for a new hybrid to bloom and the blossom was so short lived. Bill answered, "You want something that will bloom all summer, plant Petunias or Pansies."

That fall afternoon in 1983 I was at Bill's place to finalize Bill and Harriet Gratwick's (who were separated) donation of letters and manuscripts to The Poetry Collection, SUNY Buffalo, founded by Bill Gratwick's brother-in-law, Charles Abbott. Among the donation: Letters from William Carlos Williams; Typed manuscript of Williams' poem "Rogation Sunday"; Manuscript of "Hymn for Rogation Sunday," Poem, Williams Carlos Williams, Music, Thomas Canning; Programs from the performance of "Hymn for Rogation Sunday," at Rural Life Sunday, My 18, 1947, 7:30 p.m., at the Livingston County Pomona Grange; at the Lily Pond, August 13, 1950; and at the Eastman School of Music, July 30, 1951; One typed manuscript outline of Acts I and II of Williams' play Tituba's Children (written as "Juba's Children" on the manuscript outline). Sometime earlier

during the summer Bill asked me to look at the contents of an envelope and see what ought to be done.

Bill's topics of conversation on that fall afternoon included Williams' variable foot and Hugh Kenner's "Rhythm of Ideas," which had appeared in *The New York Times Book Review* on September 18. Bill recited lines of Williams from memory.

That same fall of 1983 I was invited by the William Carlos Williams Society to present something in honor of Williams to follow the Centennial Dinner of the William Carlos William Society at the Harvard Club in New York on December 29. Harriet and Bill Gratwick's belief in "Hymn for Rogation Sunday" led me to suggest a performance of the hymn at the Harvard Club as a tribute to the "Poet Laureate of the Tree Peonies," a salute to the ceremony, suggested by Bill Gratwick, in which Williams was crowned by Harriet Gratwck at the Lily Pond (*The Autobiography*, pps. 326-327).



William Carlos Williams reading "Rogation Sunday" at the Lily Pond, Linwood, 1950

Photographer Not Identified

The Director of Performing Arts in a school district where I was conducting a New York State Literary Center program, believed it would be possible to perform "Hymn for Rogation Sunday" at the Centennial with twelve high school students. He found the students, two trumpet players, two trombone players, two sopranos, two altos, two tenors, and two bases and rehearsed the students every morning for an hour and a half before school began from mid-November right through to the performance in December. We raised the funds to get everyone to NYC.

About one week before the performance Bill hooked up a sled to the back of the tractor. He drove and I rode on the sled. He stopped at particular trees, selected specific branches, and after cutting the branches handed them to me. He also included cattails that he waded into the icy water of the pond to get.

Nassos Daphnis and I brought the branches into the Biddle Room at the Harvard Club, where the dinner and the performance were to be held that evening, on the morning of December 29, while the students rehearsed to test the acoustics. Nassos created flowers from the branches that he placed around the room.

Following the performance that evening, Nassos and I found a pay phone at the Harvard Club and debated whether or not to call Bill. It was past 8:00 p.m., the time Bill went to bed. We called. Bill wanted to know about the scholars. Nassos told Bill about seeing "the boys," Williams' sons, and how they both touched and examined each branch.

*This is our world and this
is our message to world and to each other*

From William Carlos Williams, "Rogation Sunday"

In 1984, the New York Center for Visual History was filming *Voices and Visions*, hour-long documentaries on American poets for PBS <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/01/28/arts/tv-review-voices-and-visions-of-13-poets.html>.

Bill was contacted about the film they were making on Williams

<http://www.nytimes.com/1988/03/03/arts/tv-review-voices-and-visions-on-poets.html>.

Jill Janows, Senior Producer and writer for the Williams film, wanted to know if Bill could be interviewed and whether they could film at Linwood. Lawrence Pitkethly was the Executive Producer, and Richard P. Rogers was the Director

<http://hcl.harvard.edu/hfa/collections/rogers.html>. Bill had little feeling one way or the other

about the interview and filming at his place. He told me it was up to me, but with the condition we see the Ezra Pound film, directed by Lawrence Pitkethly, and the work of Richard P. Rogers, who would be directing the film. "Look at the work" was a mantra of Bill's. The Ezra Pound film was sent, and Richard Rogers sent a copy of his film *Quarry*, a look at teenagers who hung around the Quincy Quarry in the early 1970s. *Quarry* was a poignant coming-of-age film.

When the film crew arrived at Linwood for two days of shooting, as they got out of the car the first thing they saw was a red wheelbarrow glazed with water. The footage of Bill Gratwick and Linwood was not included in the final film, *Voices and Visions : William Carlos Williams*. However, in October 1986 as part of "On the Work of William Gratwick," co-sponsored by the Art Department, State University of New York at Geneseo and the New York State Literary Center, with funding from the New York State Council on the Arts, Jill Janows and Richard Rogers showed rough assembly/outtakes/Bill Gratwick, "The New York Center for Visual History on William Gratwick," that Richard Rogers had put together. Bill was moved. "It was fabulous footage," Jill Janows said of the footage they shot at Linwood over the two days. We just couldn't use it in the Williams film. Bill Gratwick stole the show."

The letters and manuscripts Bill handed to me in 1983 to look over and see what ought to be done, contained correspondence between Harriet Gratwick and William Carlos Williams. In 1947 Harriet Gratwick started the Linwood Music School and asked Williams to write a poem to celebrate the planting of the seeds in spring. She wanted the poem for a special Rogation Sunday observance for the Livingston County Pomona Grange. Harriet and Bill Gratwick invited Thomas Canning of the Eastman School of Music to set the poem to music to be performed at the Lily Pond. "Hymn for Rogation Sunday" was performed at the Lily Pond on August 13, 1950. William Carlos Williams was there, and he read the poem before it was performed.

The letters also mentioned Harriet Gratwick's founding of the York Opera Company in 1948 and that Bill and Harriet Gratwick were interested in doing a modern opera. They asked Williams for a libretto that would fit their needs and the needs of other similar groups with amateur voices. Williams was aware that a relative of Harriet Saltonstall Gratwick's was a judge in the Salem Witchcraft Trials of 1692, as he was writing "Tituba's Children" for the York Opera Company. It was decided that "Tituba's Children," a powerful look at American culture of the time, was not the gay satire Bill and Harriet were looking for. Harriet Gratwick hoped someone would pick it up and give it a good production.

In 1987 I was conducting a New York State Literary Center program in a suburban high school. An English teacher asked me for suggestions for a play for the drama club that would fit well with the program. No one had ever performed "Tituba's Children" (in *Many Loves and Other Plays* by William Carlos Williams, dedicated to Harriet and Bill Gratwick). Thanks to permission from New Directions, The New York State Literary Center proudly sponsored the premier performance of "Tituba's Children" at Penfield High School on March 27 and 28, 1987. William Gratwick and Robert Creeley came with me to speak with the cast during rehearsals.

Sometime during the fall 1983, in the Italian Garden, Bill reached out with his right arm, spread his arm to the length and breadth of the Genesee Valley and said, "This is the 'Rogation Hymn'." It is all around you."

In the spring of 1984 I walked around Linwood by myself, over the fence and into the sheep meadow, back over the fence and into the Italian Garden. I read "Rogation Sunday" aloud to myself at the spot where Bill had said, "This is the 'Rogation Hymn'." From the Italian Garden I wandered into the Dwarf Village (Bill had all of the fountains on), then by the tennis court, and somehow I found myself on a path of blue flowers, Scilla, blue flowers and tulips in light purple shades I had never seen before. The path led me to the Lily Pond.

Just as the Tree Peony gives itself away in its bloom, so did Bill give himself away.

Karen Cowperthwaite. "Two Gardens and A View: Revealing the History and the Future of An American Country Place in Western New York – Linwood." College of Environmental Science and Forestry, State University of New York, Syracuse: Project Report Submitted in Fulfillment of the Requirement for the Master of Landscape Design, 2008.

Michael Dodge. "Tree Peonies, Carrying on an Age-Old Tradition, American Breeders are Improving the King of Flowers." *Horticulture*, August 1978.

William Gratwick. *My, This Must Have Been a Beautiful Place When It Was Kept Up, As Documented in the Year 1965*. Pavilion: William Gratwick, 1965.

William Gratwick. *The Truth Tall Tales and Blatant Lies*. Rochester: Visual Studies Workshop Press, 1981.

The Autobiography of William Carlos Williams. New York: New Directions, 1967.

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