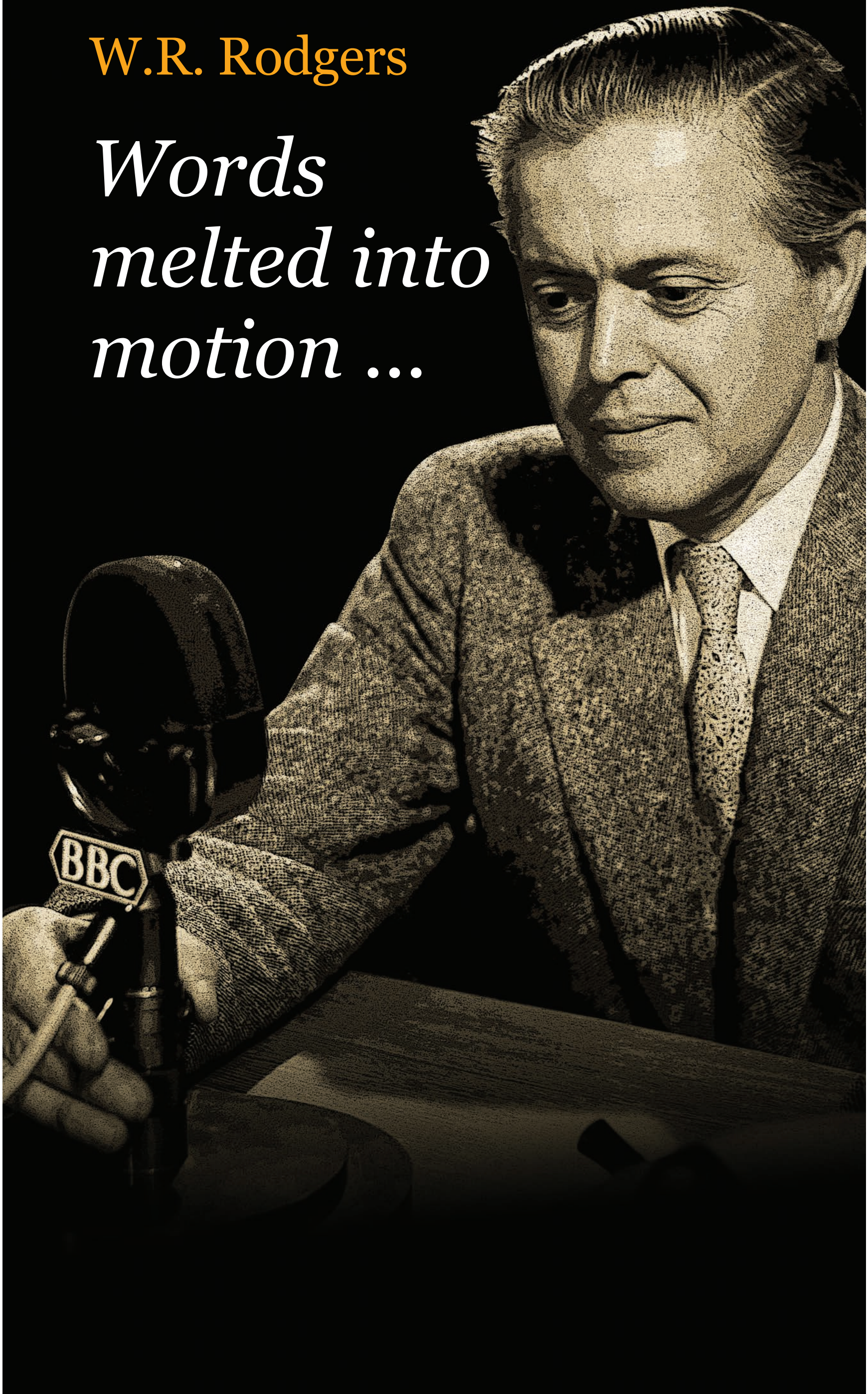


BBC  
*writers*

W.R. Rodgers

*Words  
melted into  
motion ...*





# Words melted into motion...

**W.R. Rodgers** was a celebrated writer and broadcaster. His work was varied and prolific. It included poetry, essays and a series of innovative radio programmes. He was ‘a literary figure in the widest sense’ and his career was animated by a range of themes and influences. This exhibition describes aspects of his life and celebrates the diversity, and continuing resonance and relevance, of his achievements.

*‘O these lakes and all gills that live in them,  
These acres and all legs that walk on them,  
These tall winds and all wings that cling to them,  
Are part and parcel of me, bit and bundle,  
Thumb and thimble.’*

W.R. Rodgers – Ireland

W.R. Rodgers. Portrait  
by Sidney Smith. Courtesy  
of National Museums  
Northern Ireland



W.R. Rodgers, May 1959, BBC



Louis MacNeice and W.R. Rodgers in BBC studio  
© Lucy Rodgers Cohen



W.R. Rodgers with Church Elder, Armagh  
© Lucy Rodgers Cohen



W.R. Rodgers  
© Nini Rodgers

*‘In very crude terms, the poetic side of Rodgers’s  
nature warred with the social and cultural  
inheritance... ‘Ireland’ became an imaginative home  
an alternative, ironically distanced from the London  
axis, of which Rodgers had become part, but separate  
too, from the cramped provincialism of ... The North.’*

Gerald Dawe – *The Parochial Idyll: W.R. Rodgers*



# Beginnings

William Robert ‘Bertie’ Rodgers was born in Belfast in August 1909. His childhood was shaped by his parents strict Presbyterianism – an experience not untypical of its time. Rodgers’ memories of home and community life in Edwardian east Belfast were later memorably evoked in his radio verse drama, *The Return Room* (which was first broadcast on BBC radio in 1955).

Bertie Rodgers studied English at Queen’s University, Belfast. He graduated in 1931 and then embarked on further studies at the Assembly’s College. He was licensed by the Presbytery of Belfast in 1933 and was installed as Minister of Loughgall Presbyterian Church, Cloveneden, ‘a stone church on a hill’, in 1935.

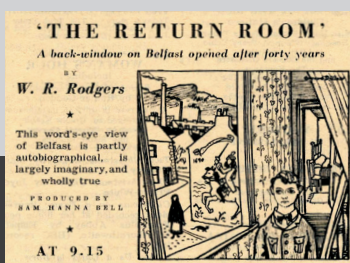
Rodgers married Marie Harden Waddell, whom he’d met whilst at Queen’s, in 1936. The couple had two daughters, Harden and Nini. Rodgers began to write poetry in the late 1930s with the support of John Hewitt and Louis MacNeice. His work reflected many influences, including landscape, people and religion.



W.R. Rodgers with family and daughters Harden and Nini  
© Nini Rodgers



W.R. Rodgers as a boy at Mountpottinger Primary School  
© Lucy Rodgers Cohen



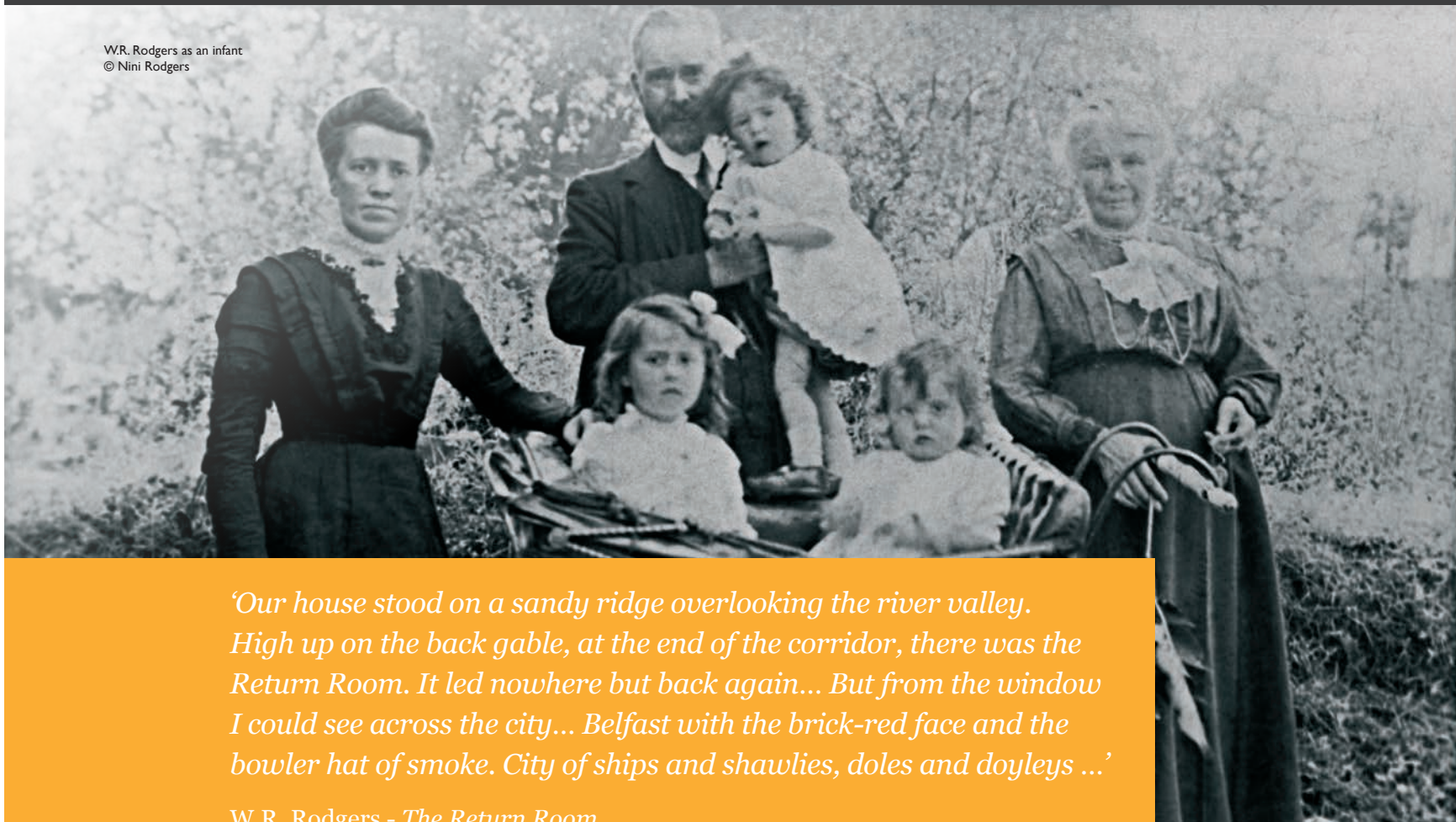
BBC programme listing for *The Return Room*, *Radio Times*, 1955



W.R. Rodgers in graduation gown, Queen's University, Belfast, 1931  
© Nini Rodgers



Marie Harden Waddell  
© Nini Rodgers



W.R. Rodgers as an infant  
© Nini Rodgers

*‘Our house stood on a sandy ridge overlooking the river valley. High up on the back gable, at the end of the corridor, there was the Return Room. It led nowhere but back again... But from the window I could see across the city... Belfast with the brick-red face and the bowler hat of smoke. City of ships and shawlies, doles and doyleys ...’*

W.R. Rodgers - *The Return Room*

*‘It is always afternoon in my country. Time is suspended. The blown rose never drops; the shot bird never falls. The clock never strikes. It is always afternoon in my country. An ageless afternoon. I am a parson. Here in this field within fields I keep the flock of God. Here I lead them to the Well of Truth and the Water of Life.’*

W.R. Rodgers - *Professional Portrait of a Country Parson*

Beginnings



# New Associations

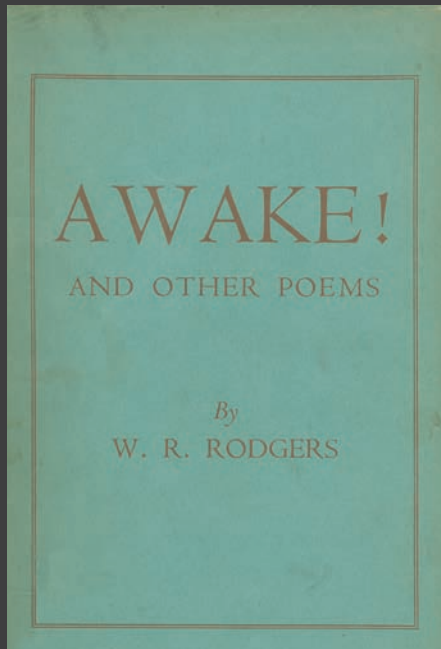
Rodgers was an eloquent and tolerant preacher. He enjoyed pastoral visits in a community which he described as ‘a close and intricate wickerwork of human relationships and functions’ and combined his work as a minister with a growing interest in writing. His home in Loughgall, a ‘small big house full of books’, became a meeting place for other writers, including Louis MacNeice whom he met for the first time in 1939.

Rodgers’ debut collection of poetry was published in 1941. *Awake and Other Poems* met with critical acclaim. It had been produced in an ‘urgent burst of creativity’ and revealed Rodgers’ ‘exuberant vocabulary’ and also some of the inner tensions that would mark so much of his poetry.

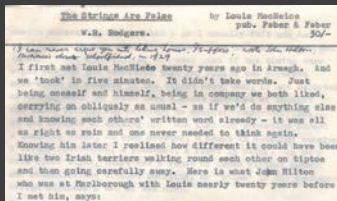
He took leave of absence from Loughgall for domestic reasons in 1943. It was in this period that he wrote an article for the *New Statesman* entitled *Black North* which included a critical assessment of community divisions and local politics. He returned to Loughgall, but decided to leave the ministry in 1946 to take up a new position with the BBC in London. He left with mixed feelings and an obvious affection for the congregation that he left behind.

*‘Rodgers’ religious temperament, which he never discarded entirely, was alive to sensation and inimical to guilt and coercion of any sort.’*

Patricia Craig



*Awake and Other Poems*  
W.R. Rodgers, 1941



Extract from script for *The Strings are False* ©  
Nini Rodgers



BBC script-writer and producer,  
Louis MacNeice, 1942



W.R. Rodgers in the manse, Loughgall  
© Lucy Rodgers Cohen



W.R. Rodgers with fellow clergymen, Armagh  
© Lucy Rodgers Cohen



W.R. Rodgers, BBC, March 1950

Interior of Loughgall  
Presbyterian Church,  
Cloveneden

*‘I cannot say how much I taught my parishioners... or how much remains with them, but I know they taught me many things. I learned from them the subtle tensions of an old and balanced community ... and where passions and memories were quickly kindled. I learned to treat all men without prejudice; indeed I came to be known as the Catholic Presbyterian. I learned too to respect older patterns of social behaviour and to value a rural society, not as a primitive organisation, but as a highly sophisticated and skilful design for living.’*

W.R. Rodgers – *On leaving one’s church*



Broadcasting House, London, 1949





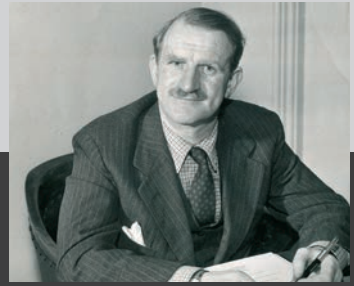
# Broadcasting

Rodgers' first radio script was *City Set on a Hill*, a programme about Armagh. It was produced by Louis MacNeice in the BBC's Belfast studios in 1945. It was followed by *The Professional Portrait of a Country Parson* which was broadcast shortly after his departure from Loughgall in 1946. Other work in this early period of his BBC career included *Resurrection Sequence* – a series of fourteen poems, each of them based on a verse from the Passion narratives in the Gospels.

Rodgers quickly became part of a tightly-knit group of writer producers that included Dylan Thomas, Roy Campbell and his 'principal patron' Louis MacNeice. He also maintained his connections with BBC colleagues in Belfast. *The Return Room*, his celebrated evocation of childhood memories, was produced by Sam Hanna Bell in 1955 and reflected the new regionalist impulse in local broadcasting. It captured Belfast life in the period immediately after WW1 and has been described by Patricia Craig as 'a singular achievement.'



Gerard Dillon illustrations depicting scenes from *The Return Room* © Patrick Dillon



Sam Hanna Bell

Rodgers was an innovative broadcaster, using new technology and techniques to bring his subjects to life. His work included a series of mosaic-style radio portraits of Irish writers. These were published posthumously by the BBC in 1972 and established his reputation as the 'oral historian of the Irish literary movement'.

Career success was accompanied by domestic troubles. Rodgers had become romantically involved with Marianne Helweg, the wife of the BBC's Director of Radio Features, Laurence Gilliam – creating a complex and difficult situation at work. At MacNeice's prompting, Rodgers left the BBC in 1952 and embarked on a new career as a freelance writer and broadcaster.



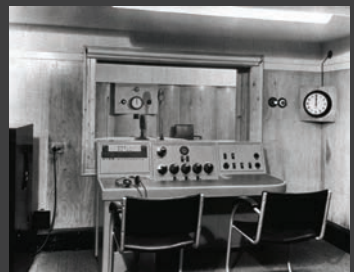
Laurence Gilliam, BBC Features Department



W.R. Rodgers with Marianne Helweg  
© Lucy Rodgers Cohen

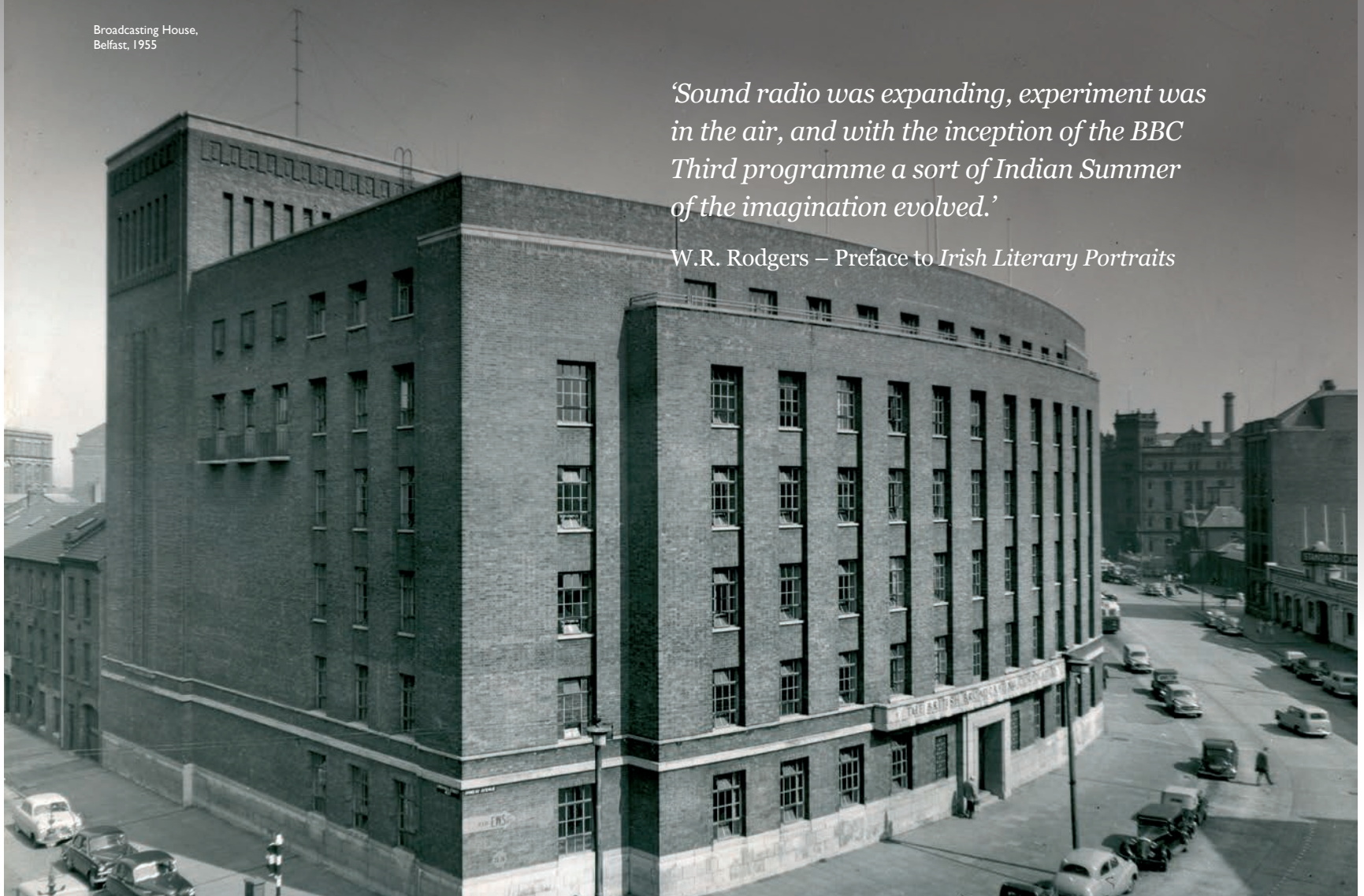
*'I have no hesitation in describing The Return Room as one of the most important Irish poems of the twentieth century... As a technical feat, it represents the highest form of artistic achievement.'*

Paul Muldoon – Foreword to *The Return Room* (2010)



BBC studio interior, Broadcasting House, London, 1947

Broadcasting House, Belfast, 1955



*'Sound radio was expanding, experiment was in the air, and with the inception of the BBC Third programme a sort of Indian Summer of the imagination evolved.'*

W.R. Rodgers – Preface to *Irish Literary Portraits*



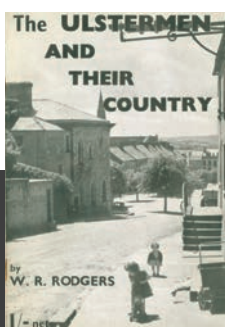
# Changing Direction

Rodgers' second collection of poetry, *Europa and the Bull and Other Poems*, was published in 1952. Its reception was mixed. Life as a freelance writer also presented its challenges, both creative and financial. Literary projects in this period included *Ireland in Colour* which amplified some of the themes which he had explored in his earlier essay *The Ulstermen and their Country*. He was also engaged in intermittent work on *The Character of Ireland*, a publication which he and MacNeice had been commissioned to produce in 1948 and which 'would take them the rest of their lives not to complete'.

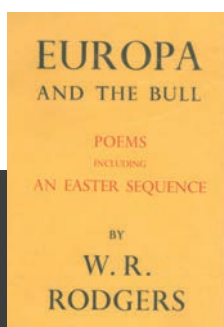
*'The indisputable fact is that some kind of tension or conflict is inescapable from life itself and inherent in it. One might say that life is the struggle between opposites. And that it is this tension in the individual, or in the community, that gives character and zest to both and makes for growth.'*

W.R. Rodgers

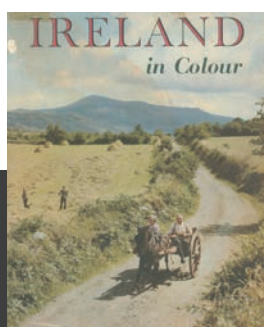
*The Ulstermen and their Country*



*The Ulstermen and Their Country*  
by W.R. Rodgers, 1947



*Europa and the Bull*  
by W.R. Rodgers, 1952



*Ireland in Colour*, 1957

Rodgers married Marianne Helweg in 1953. Their daughter Lucy was born in 1956. The family had moved to a farmhouse on the outskirts of Colchester and Rodgers remained busy giving readings and talks, writing articles and making regular return visits to Ireland. He continued to make programmes for the BBC, including a feature on the Easter Rising in 1916, but wrote little poetry.

Rodgers seems to have struggled with the challenges of this period. His close friend and mentor Louis MacNeice died in September 1963 and other contemporaries also died in relatively quick succession. All of this combined with the demise of the BBC's Radio Features Department to make him feel that he 'had chosen the wrong last ditch ... and must now find a new world again.'

*'W.R. Rodgers was a fine poet, highly praised in his lifetime, and now... almost forgotten. But some day the pendulum will swing in his favour.'*

John Boyd – *The Middle of My Journey*



W.R. Rodgers in BBC studio



Louis MacNeice in BBC studio, 1955



W.R. Rodgers with daughter Lucy  
© Lucy Rodgers Cohen

W.R. Rodgers and Marianne  
at Wivenhoe, Essex  
© Lucy Rodgers Cohen





Rodgers became a Visiting Professor at Pitzer College in Claremont, California in 1966. He was a popular lecturer and seemed energised by the opportunity and regular income which this appointment provided. Rodgers' health, however, was failing. After surgery in England he returned to America where he was now employed on a part-time basis at California State Polytechnic. He became seriously ill again and died in Los Angeles in February 1969.

W.R. Rodgers  
*Arts Council memorandum*



The day we began to train,  
We showed you and I like  
Those who respected how ready  
week, the Commander.  
Those who drilled daily,  
Willing to lose  
The shadow of Dunk,  
The challenge, An American  
Always through the sound.  
Just for study had failed,  
Their heart and heart to glory  
We know the day  
We know the day, we know all we did  
And let a King to stand triumphant  
no day was

*Extract from Hurricane: An Insider's Look by retired broadcaster W.R. Rodgers*  
Radio Utah, 12.07pm W.T. Rodgers

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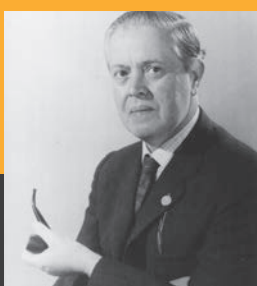
W.R. Rodgers – letter to Dan Davin



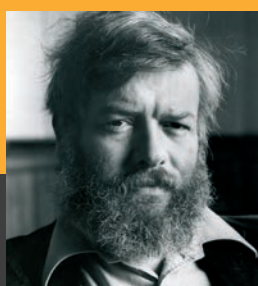
# Legacy

Rodgers' ashes were returned to Belfast and after a memorial service in First Ballymacarret Presbyterian Church – which he had attended as a boy – he was buried in Loughgall. The minister-poet's life had come full circle. Seamus Heaney read a short selection of Rodgers' poetry at the memorial service – reflecting his importance for a new generation of northern writers. John Hewitt, a lifelong friend and contemporary wrote: 'now that wild creature is run down at last'.

The early prominence and acclaim which Rodgers had enjoyed as a poet was affected by changes in literary fashion and a falling away in his own productivity. Michael Longley however, remembered how 'Northern Irish poets of my vintage revered Rodgers'. He had played an important and multi-faceted role in the literary life of post-war Ulster and combined work as a prose essayist and reviewer with programme-making and teaching.



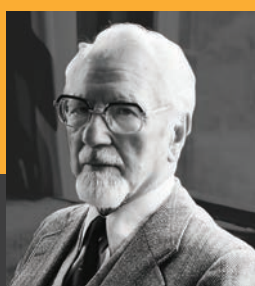
W.R. Rodgers  
© Nini Rodgers



Michael Longley c.1976  
© Wilfred Green



Seamus Heaney, BBC



John Hewitt  
© Dermot Dunbar

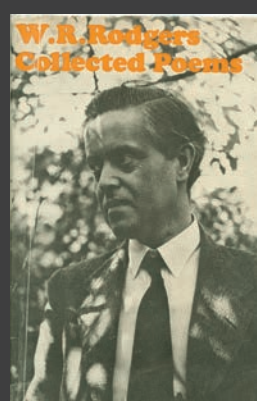


W.R. Rodgers in Loughgall

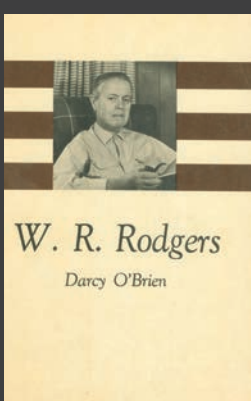
*'W.R. Rodgers is a latterday metaphysical who apprehends the divine through the senses, The Word through words ... In his best poetry we find "The Word made flesh, melted into motion."'*

Michael Longley

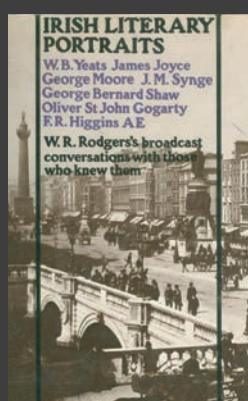
Rodgers' essays and broadcasts chronicled a changing and sometimes vanishing landscape – both rural and urban. His poetry displayed a fascination with language and its possibilities and his best pieces, including *The Return Room*, speak still with a freshness and unmatched vitality.



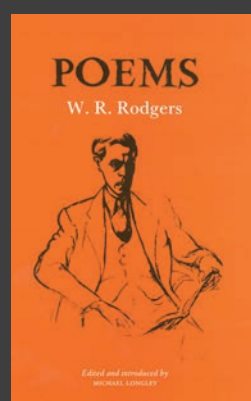
W.R. Rodgers: Collected Poems, introduced by Dan Davin, 1971



W.R. Rodgers by Darcy O'Brien, 1970



Irish Literary Portraits, 1972. Broadcast portraits of Irish writers by W.R. Rodgers



Poems: W.R. Rodgers edited by Michael Longley, 1993



The Return Room Blackstaff Press, 2010

*'Always the arriving winds of words  
Pour like Atlantic gales over these ears ...  
And speak for me - their most astonished host.'*

W.R. Rodgers – *Words*











