

## **Celebrating Williams**

### **A new book helps honor the poet's 125th birthday**

By Tim Norris

Tracking William Carlos Williams through the streets of Paterson, Brooklyn-born photographer and teacher Thomas Roma came upon a fig tree wrapped in a band of paper, a shroud against the cold. The sight stopped him still, called for his camera.

It was Williams's kind of image, concrete, visceral, evocative, and it connected Roma to the New Jersey poet and physician being celebrated with a symposium and a host of 125th birthday events this weekend in Rutherford. It also took Roma to depths in himself, to a shared grief, a renewal. At its best, he says, Williams's poetry works into a reader's conscience and sinews.

Festivities tomorrow and Sunday in the Williams Center in Rutherford bring scholars, family members, musicians and artists and community members together to toast the borough's most noteworthy resident. William's central notion of "no ideas but in things" helped inspire a break from formal and florid tradition and a sea-change in American poetry and thought.

Williams's life beyond poetry, from his birth in Rutherford in 1883 (Sept. 17) to his death there in 1963, was just as inspiring, Della Rowland says, and connected him indelibly to Rutherford and the surrounding communities where he practiced medicine, including Paterson and Passaic. "He was not only a groundbreaking poet; he was a physician, a pediatrician who cared deeply about his patients, his neighbors, the whole community," she says. "He listened and talked with his patients, and it's their voices that are in the poems. He could have lived anywhere, and he lived here. He's ours, and he wanted to be ours."

As chair of the symposium, Rowland works with a growing network of Rutherford residents, leaders, artists and writers, including former councilwoman Martha Losada, Public Library director Jane Fisher, borough historian Rod Leith and Williams's youngest granddaughter, Daphne Williams Fox, to keep Williams's memory and work and an appreciation for American poetry alive.

The now-annual celebration started after Rowland and her husband, Tony Fradkin, and his three children moved to the borough in 1991 and sought care from a pediatrician named William Williams. "He never said, 'My Dad is William Carlos Williams,'" Rowland recalls. "He was a very fine writer himself, and he was working on a book of essays about his Dad. Since my husband and I are both writers, I thought I should ask if I could help him edit them."

Looking further into William Carlos Williams and his work, Rowland discovered far more than just a literary lion. As Tom Roma says, "He was not some intellectual. This is a guy who put his hands on human bodies and affected their lives tremendously." As a pediatrician, Williams delivered more than 2,000 babies and treated many thousands more, and their descendents populate the area.

He also paid a price. "He was trying to do something difficult with his poetry," Roma says. "He wasn't saying forget (Robert) Frost or (Emily) Dickinson, but he was saying the artist has to be new, find something relevant. He was doing a painful deconstruction of ideas that were held dear. And never in

his lifetime was he considered one of the giants. He alienated a lot of folks. But he had patrons and the respect of very important people."

For Roma, author and director of photography at Columbia University, the connection to a Williams poem about a wrapped fig and the death of an infant made sighting of the fig tree on a Paterson street electric. It hit at his heart.

At the time, he was retracing not just Williams's steps but those of writer and teacher Robert Coles, a physician, Harvard professor and Pulitzer Prize-winning author who in his youth had accompanied Williams on his rounds. Coles took notes. Roma and Coles had been collaborating for years on a book based on those rounds, "House Calls with William Carlos Williams, MD," just published by Powerhouse Books. Doctors still made house calls then. Williams relished them.

"He approached poetry and doctoring with this artist's eye for detail," Rowland says. "When he went into a house on a call, he didn't just talk to the patients; he looked at everything, the furnishings, what they were wearing, what was in the sink. He would tell Robert Coles, 'look at the patient,' and Coles said he learned more from Dr. Williams than from any of the medical journals he ever studied. What (Williams) saw and heard in doctoring became subject matter for his poetry."

As much as an artist and thinker, Rowland says, Williams was a family man, a community man. His father was English and Danish, his mother Puerto Rican, and he balanced a growing literary career that took him all over the world with a local medical practice. "He had this incredible stamina," Roma says. "And, without bitterness, he was true to his understanding of his life and mission."

The tribute to his 125th birthday extends from the Williams Center into Rutherford schools and its public library, a cultural bulwark. Students in high schools across 10 counties have entered a Williams-inspired poetry contest, and Rutherford grade school students have made Williams birthday cards and other works of art. "Every student involved in this knows who William Carlos Williams is," Rowland says. "That's something to be proud of."

That knowledge isn't universal. Locals refer to Williams as "the father of American poetry," but other names usually come up, most often Philip Freneau and Walt Whitman. Williams, himself, admired Whitman. Few scholars lift Williams as a poet into the company of contemporaries such as Frost, Ezra Pound or T.S. Eliot, though even fewer appreciate the breadth of Williams's work, his essays, plays, more than 40 books, and his generosity with other artists and the townspeople he saw every day.

Regardless, Williams's poetic and personal impact is clear, especially in Rutherford and Paterson and environs, where his direct imagery and desire for an American, street-level poetry of the commonplace inspired the Paterson beat poet Allen Ginsberg and writer Jack Kerouac, among others.

From there, Roma asked a Williams relative if she could find a list of addresses her great-uncle had visited on house calls, many in Paterson and Passaic. He and his wife then started driving to them, sporadically, over months and years. Reportorial skill

In detailed observations and focus on everyday life and language, Williams worked as a kind of reporter, though not in standard TV-radio-newspaper forms. One of this weekend's panels, moderated by Kerry Driscoll and including Neil Baldwin, author of the biography "To all Gentleness: William

Carlos Williams, the Doctor Poet," is headlined "Still Getting the News from Poems: WCW in the 21st Century."

For the average reader, Williams's more than 250-page epic, "Paterson," isn't easy. It's a multi-layered jumble of images and references and events, much like the city itself. It percolates, though, with the commonplace, with sights and sounds and voices. That clear-eyed focus on, and appreciation for, everyday reality was Williams's signal message.

The Coles-Roma "House Calls" and this weekend's festival plan to bring that message home. Roma found retracing the route of William's house calls especially moving.

"As I drove through Paterson, I was reminded of this powerful American immigrant spirit that runs through all our veins," he says. "William Carlos Williams was the prototypical American artist, and he connected to that spirit, to our shared mythology."

Roma envisioned what he calls "a documentary in still images," to accompany words from Coles and Williams himself. The idea for "House Calls" had started in 1996 with his first exposure to Williams's "The Doctor Stories," compiled by Coles.

"My wife and I had a baby who died the day she was born," Roma says. "It's one of those things, there's almost no way to talk about it without sounding maudlin and doing a complete disservice to our actual feelings. It's too hard to explain that an event like that could actually make life worth living." Williams's and Coles's down-to-earth accounts from Paterson, Passaic and Rutherford gave them solace and heart.

For Roma, the image and promise of the fig tree and the Williams poem and life endures. "The tree is wrapped so it can hibernate, with the understanding that something better will come out the other side. We can't look to politicians for hope. Coles wrote Robert Kennedy's last speech before he was assassinated. That was a time when all politics on both sides of the aisle were the politics of hope. Now everyone's trying to frighten us all the time into one kind of action or another.

"If artists don't believe that life is worth living, then all is lost. William Carlos believed in life. He brought lives into the world, saved lives and showed them."