

Water at the Roots: Poems and Insights of a Visionary Farmer

Philip Britts

Jennifer Harries, Editor

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A poet as well as a pastor and farmer, Philip Britts was only thirty-one years of age when he died in 1949. His poetry and life story are collected for the first time in *Water at the Roots*, a slim volume that uses his own words to help tell his story.

More than seventy of Britts's writings—mostly poems, but also letters and essays—are included in the collection, with connecting text that explains the circumstances of their authorship. His pacifist views led him to the Bruderhof, a Christian community that shared ownership of land and possessions. As World War II intensified, the group looked for a way to move abroad, and formed a community in eastern Paraguay. Britts helped to cultivate crops, developed a hospital to treat community members and locals, and served as a religious leader.

Poems depict a range of emotions in the midst of difficult circumstances. "The Longest Drought Shall Pass," from June of 1945, was likely written around the time Britts contracted the fungal infection that eventually killed him. "Mahranita and a Million Russians" links the 1941 death of a local girl with news from abroad of Germany's brutality in the Soviet Union. Essays address Britts's views on how to be a good farmer (that organic farming cannot "find its full meaning outside the context of the whole of life"), and his notion that works without faith are efforts in vain.

Britts's unpretentious style brings immediacy to his subjects, and *Water at the Roots* provides enough context about his life, and the challenges of building a community in an environmentally difficult region, to underscore what the author was up against—whether because of banana plants that wouldn't grow, or long-delayed news about the war back home. It's a thorough book that illuminates an important but little-known writer.

JEFF FLEISCHER (March/April 2018)

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