

Alabama Women's Hall of Fame

March 9, 2017

*Remarks made by Mr. Robert W. Eiland, long-time friend of inductee
Mary Ward Brown*

When I heard Mr. Mathews say that he wanted a 12 to 15 minute introduction for Mary Ward Brown (known to one and all as Mary T.), I immediately thought of the 3 B's of Public Speaking: Be Bold, Be Brief, Be Gone. Mary T. handled the "Be Bold" all by herself, and I'll do my best on the "Be Brief" and the "Be Gone."

I know that I was advised not to dwell on Mary T's awards, accomplishments, and honors as they are listed in the biographical sketch in the Installation Ceremony Brochure; however, they are such important parts of my memories of her that I decided to include them in my comments.

The boldness of Mary T. manifested after the death of her husband and the fulfillment of her son Kirtley's life in his law career, marriage, and fatherhood. With indomitable will, Mary T. set out to perfect her art of storytelling. And what an art it has proven to be! From fledgling beginnings in such national publications and literary journals as the *Threepenny Review*, the *Atlantic Monthly*, *Grand Street* magazine, and *McCall's* magazine, she graduated to the publications of *Tongues of Flame*, *It Wasn't All Dancing and Other Stories*, and *Fanning the Spark: A Memoir*. Along the way she received ubiquitous praise and prestigious awards. Among the later was, of course, the Hemingway Foundation/Pen Award. My brother, Bill, wrote in an article entitled "With an Alabama Accent: An Overview of the State's Literature: "In giving Ms. Brown its Ernest Hemingway Foundation Award for the best first work of fiction, the PEN literary society cited her work as 'profound, compassionate and unflinchingly honest.'" Bill continued by writing, "Quite simply, her stories are gentle reminders that it is in the everyday drama of human experience that we find both the joy and the pain as Old South meets New South." As you are probably aware, Mary T. also received the Alabama Author Award two times from the Alabama Library Association, the Lillian Smith Book Award, the Harper Lee Award for Alabama's Distinguished Writer, and the Hillsdale Award for Fiction from the Fellowship of Southern Writers. Her literary works were also featured in the *Best American Short Stories* collection of 1983 and 1984 and in *New Stories by Southern Women*. I was in the audience when 'Ashes of Roses,' an original play written by Dr. Norman McMillan based on the stories of Mary Ward Brown, was performed at Marion Military Institute and at AUM in Montgomery. My memories of Mary T's Russia trip had grown hazy, and I was happy to find that Professor Wayne Flynt's recollections were better than mine. He wrote the following: "When the Quaker US/USSR Committee organized an exchange of 40 prominent American and Soviet writers to help thaw Cold War relations between the two nations, they selected Mary Ward to join a galaxy of the best U.S. literary stylists: Wendell Berry,

Robert Penn Warren, Joyce Carol Oates, John Updike, Alice Walker, Mary Gordon, John Sayles, among them.”

A few additional quotes capture the essence of Mary T’s stories:

“In prose as pure as branch water, Mary Ward Brown captures the complex changes in the New South.” – *People* magazine

“The people are ordinary, but the underlying relationships are as complex as the changes that have swept through the South since the 1960s. Mrs. Brown’s characters—black and white—are small-town residents caught up in the dilemmas of survival.” – *The Atlanta Journal and Constitution*

“Writing in a deceptively simple, unadorned style, Mary Ward Brown unfolds her stories with such natural clarity and formal perfection that one scarcely notices the writing at all—a hallmark of the finest storytellers from Chekhov to Eudora Welty, a tradition in which *Tongues of Flame* has a rightful place.” – *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*

Mary T. was a great admirer of the short story writer Chekhov and the poet, William Butler Yeats. My younger brother, Clark, remembers Mary T. reciting lines from Yeats’ poetry as the two of them traveled the highways and byways of Alabama to locations where she had been invited to speak about her work, to read selections from her stories, or to participate in panel discussions or the like. It was on one of those occasions in Tuscaloosa that Clark remembers the hosts providing a chair for Mary T. He remembers that she stood for over an hour answering questions. It was also during these trips that the two of them “tossed about” possible titles for her memoir.

Mary T. always said that she came “late” to her craft, after (she added) “the first or even second or maybe third or fourth blush of youth.” When I suggested to her that with that “lateness” came a maturity of vision and a seasoned gravitas in her writing, she asked if gravitas was a fancy word for “old age and infirmity.” I assured her that it was not!

When I first began to travel down that miserable, pot-hole filled, uneven county road to Mary T’s home, we took long walks down the road beyond Buzzy Fitt’s house or up the road toward the Crawford’s. At that time, Boone was our faithful shadow. Once Boone was in canine heaven, Mary T. acquired or adopted several other dogs. She did not keep them, but she saw that they went to good homes. None of them could replace the much loved Boone. She did have an acquaintance with some four legged varmints. She laughingly said that she had known a few two legged skunks, but she never thought that she would have a family of the four legged variety under the floorboards of her home. Mary T. engaged in valiant combat with them until they were finally persuaded to seek different accommodations.

Mary T's friendships were cross generational. Young and old arrived to visit, to share a glass of wine or a cup of tea and to talk about art, music, poetry, film, religion, photography, and always books, books by established and newer authors, small volumes or substantial tomes. Always there were the books, lining walls, packed into shelves, along the floor. It goes without saying that they covered a wide variety of subjects and a wider spectrum of interests. When she was not honing her craft, Mary T. was reading, listening to jazz, or watching carefully selected videos or DVDs.

Whether dressed in casual clothes and a big floppy hat or in more formal attire, Mary T. always looked elegant. She had that uniquely Southern lady flair for knowing instinctively what outfit looked right for any occasion. She was in no way a "fashionista," but her long skirts and diaphanous shawls were almost signature pieces. I must admit that I preferred that look on her rather than more frou-frou ensembles. One of my favorite photographs of Mary T. is the one taken by Jerry Siegel's nephew which appears on the back cover of *It Wasn't All Dancing* and *Fanning the Spark*.

My brother, Bill, maintains that Mary T's friendships with Jerry Siegel, John Lapsley, and Crawford Gillis resulted in a mini-Renaissance in Selma that mitigated to some extent the negative press that the Queen City had received at the height of the Civil Rights Movement. Her friendship with Kathryn Tucker Windham and Charlie, The Tin Man, further solidified her attachment to Selma.

Mary T. often spoke of her great love for Kirtley and her granddaughters, Mary Hays and Helen. She spoke of her appreciation for Suzannah as Kirtley's wife and the mother of her grandchildren. She spoke of her renewed faith and her love for St. Wilfrid's Episcopal Church in Marion. She reminisced about many citizens of Marion and Perry County who were long dead before I visited with her at the round table by the window in her sitting room off the kitchen. She gave me recipes from ladies who were noted cooks in the county before I was born. Mary T. always said that she was not much of a cook, but she did give me her recipe for a dessert that she called "Secret Weapon." I know, too, that there were many letters and care packages to Kirtley in Vietnam.

When we celebrated Mary T's 90th birthday, people came from all over Alabama and surrounding states to honor her extraordinary life and her remarkable achievements. My home was filled with flowers sent earlier or delivered by hand on the day of the event—all given with love and admiration for a Perry County treasure. We placed a chair near the receiving line so that Mary T. could sit if she became tired. Do you think she ever sat? No, she stood the entire time as over 250 guests arrived to greet her.

My brother, Clark, and I sometimes drove Mary T. to various doctors' appointments or to events around the state. Clark drove more often than I as I cannot tell you directions for Perry County, much less for Alabama. No matter the time of day

(morning, noon, afternoon), Mary T's first question when she entered the vehicle was "Where are we going to eat?" She loved good food and could pack away large quantities for such a petite lady. She could have made an excellent commercial for Lottie's, a local restaurant, since she loved turkey and dressing, collards, sweet potatoes, homemade rolls and good cornbread, as well as desserts. That little lady could really eat, but she must have had some kind of marvelous metabolism as she never gained weight. Mary T. also loved a glass of good wine and dark chocolate. She gave them up in her 90s for reasons that she shared with me in front of Harris', Inc. one day, but I think I'll keep that to myself since it may embarrass Kirtley.

I had not thought to title my, I hope, brief comments about Mary T., but the more I thought about it, I changed my feeble mind. The title that just felt right to me – **Bloom Where You Are Planted: A Tribute to Mary Ward Brown.**

It was a privilege to call Mary T. friend. I'll always cherish her memory, and I'll always be thankful that Kirtley generously allowed us all to share in her love. Mary T. may well have accepted the inevitability of "It Wasn't All Dancing," but her words continue to dance across the pages, and the memories of a much loved, much admired, and much missed Mary T. continue to dance in our hearts.