Margaret M. Bryant

Margaret M. Bryant (Ph.D., D. Litt., L.H.D., D. H.) was born to John and Hattie Bryant in Edgefield Co., SC, on December 3rd, 1900. She grew up on a farm in the area known as The Ridge, between Johnston and Trenton (which had one of the few banks around that did not collapse during The Depression). In The Depression, however, John Bryant lost his farm of about 1000 acres because he could not pay a debt of $100 to a neighbor, a great blow to a proud man who boasted the very first automobile in the county.

"In spite of her problem arm," Professor Bryant's youngest niece has written, "Margaret Bryant learned to drive the car as a young child and also to swim and ride a bicycle," but she was so nearsighted she had to quit the bicycle after running into people on the farm: she even hit the side of the house because she didn't see it. She learned to play the piano (to exercise her arm) and always played at family gatherings and reunions. But most of all from her earliest years — from the time she was "Maggie Mae," before she changed her forenames legally to Margaret M. — "she was busy correcting everybody's English," reports niece Mrs. Marian Jeter Woolsey. "Cousins who came to her funeral told tales of these occurrences," remembering her childhood.

Her interest in language took her through honors at Winthrop College (1921), a master's degree (1925) and a doctorate (1931) at Columbia University and brought her many honors, among them honorary degrees from Winthrop College (SC), Cedar Crest College (PA), Francis Marion College (SC), and Northern Michigan University. She lectured at major universities in Europe, the Middle East, Australia, New Zealand, in China (from which she once dramatically escaped, on the last boat out as war erupted), and in Japan, where her English grammar became a Japanese textbook and she herself a "cover girl" on an intellectual magazine, photographed by Bachrach. When her autobiography was published, it was published in Japan.

She was one of the original members of the faculty of Brooklyn College (now part of The City University of New York) and chair of the English Department at a time when women were seldom found in such positions. She always said that the Brooklyn tradition (which now has died out) of women teaching while wearing hats came from the period when she went from classroom to classroom in temporary quarters that offered no place for her to hang up her hat and coat. When she retired after 41 years of teaching there, Brooklyn College had long since become co-ed and integrated and women were at last prominent on the faculty as well as in the student body. When she retired in 1970 she could look back on 11 books (including a major contribution to American grammar), over 100 scholarly articles in important journals, participation in international conferences (on linguistics, onomastics, folk music, etc.), and significant leadership in an amazing number of national scholarly organizations. (In one linguistic association she and Louise Pound were at one time the only female members).

Professor Bryant was a founding member of the American Name Society and twice its president, president of The American Society of Geolinguistics, a leader in Phi Beta Kappa, The American Association of University Women, The International Linguistic Association, The Modern Language Association, the American Dialect Society, and more. As Dickens would say, "busy busy busy, as busy as can be" even on sabbatical (typically lecturing on American English in Burma, Thailand, Iran, or elsewhere), forever busy as the dickens. And yet she always had time for her innumerable personal and professional friends, time to talk them into joining this or that useful group or reading a paper or attending a conference. Many will recall the brochures for ANS and other worthy organizations which she fished out of her capacious handbag and pressed on likely prospects for membership. She also supported quite a few scholarly organizations with generous annual donations of money as well as time, but that was less widely known.

E. Wallace McMullen, whose Names Institute she attended every year and recruited for with vigor, writes:

> While active for half a century in MLA she was blessed with — or created — more personal contacts than anyone else I have ever known. She was always introducing shy newcomers to people of eminence who, once newcomers themselves, also turned out to be very human and friendly. So far as I know she never dined alone and had a way of herding others into group luncheons where we had an opportunity to get acquainted with other scholars.

Whether encouraging undergraduates at Brooklyn College or more advanced students at the Graduate Center of CUNY to talk with each other, to meet senior scholars, to make plans and get projects accomplished, or as a U.S. cultural attaché to India, or at the International Congress of Onomastic Sciences abroad or some little regional meeting of ANS, she was always a creative force.

I was hired by her to teach at Brooklyn College after she had on the one hand sold the appointments committee on me and on the other hand argued me into accepting Brooklyn rather than one of the other units of what became CUNY or offers "outside the city" (which she made sound equivalent to "in Siberia"). That was 1961. Some months later she talked me into attending the second Names Institute. "You'll meet Professor Wrenn of Oxford University," she promised. "And, while you're at it — of course you'll come, I'll arrange the transportation — you might as well read a little paper on names." Later still she nominated me for a post in ANS that led to my first term as president. She persuaded me, as a personal favor, to join The International Linguistic Association in order to be its secretary — and I did for two years; thereafter serving for some years on the governing board. At her suggestion I joined The American Society of Geolinguistics, of which I have twice been president and for which I have twice directed large conferences. Through her I met all the important scholars in the field of onomastics, folklore, and related disciplines. At her suggestion I wrote *What's in a Name?* — and dedicated it to her.

I go on so about myself only to document from one person's experience how she helped scholarly organizations and the careers of individual scholars. She was irresistible. For years Arthur Berliner (whose interest in street names began when he was a taxi driver) was "volunteered" by her to handle transport to

and from New Jersey for the Names Institute. She made perfect local arrangements for meetings. If she had any program spot she needed to fill, she would telephone you and you would give a speech for her. If you had any scholarly project you did not have time to do yourself, she would hand it on to a colleague. If you had any proverbs (for example), she wanted 3x5 cards from you.

John Algeo's first contact with Professor Bryant was when he and Thomas Pyles, as graduate students, were given assignments to investigate some American usage, "the results to be turned over to Margaret Bryant, who was then editing *Current American Usage*." Algeo used her books when he began teaching, and later:

> when she retired, I talked with her about the collection she had assembled as chair of the American Dialect Society's Committee on Proverbial Sayings, and was glad that Kelsie Harder, Stewart Kingsbury, and Wolfgang Meider were able to use the material for their *Dictionary of American Proverbs*.

That major reference work (1992) was dedicated to Margaret M. Bryant. Professor Ruth Z. Temple (Brooklyn College CUNY, *emerita)*, whose appreciative speech at Professor Bryant's retirement is still recalled with great admiration all these years later and who founded at the Graduate Center CUNY an annual dissertation prize in Professor Bryant's name, believes that in the *Dictionary* Professor Bryant was not given anything like the credit she deserved. It was "a lifetime collection," and Professor Temple recalls seeing Professor Bryant's famous apartment at 1 Montague Street in Brooklyn — the one with *the* view of Manhattan one used to see at the opening of movies — crammed with boxes of 3x5 proverb cards. I think Professor Bryant would care most that the book was finished and available to the scholarly world. She was one of those persons who, not bothering too much who got the credit for things, was the more able to get things done.

Many of her friends and former colleagues sought kudos for her after she became *emerita*. Twice a friend politicked his way onto committees on honors and awards at Brooklyn College CUNY in attempts to get her a presidential medal or an honorary degree.

On the fiftieth anniversary of Brooklyn College she and the two or three other surviving original faculty members ought to have been celebrated; instead a few politicos were paraded. Later on there was more interest in honoring ourselves by honoring her with a doctorate *honoris causa* but by then she was too infirm to meet the most basic requirement: honorees must attend the ceremonies. It was our loss, not hers.

When ANS published a *Festschrift* in her honor (1974), writers considered that having their pieces included was a signal honor to themselves. As with collections honoring Allen Walker Read and a very few others of great distinction, boasting a connection of any kind enhanced our sense of ourselves and gave some small opportunity to express gratitude for having been lucky enough to know the honoree more or less well; to have been in the presence of graciousness and dedication over a long lifetime to the highest ideals of learning.

Dedicating collected papers of The Names Institute to Margaret Bryant (1993), E. Wallace McMullen hailed her as an "eminent linguistic scholar, inspiring teacher, dedicated counselor, officer in numerous professional national and international societies, and devoted friend to countless numbers of deeply appreciative scholars." Those scholars are scattered from Sweden to The Indus, at U.S. colleges and universities where she taught or lectured (in New York, Vermont, Texas, Colorado, Ohio, North and South Carolina, Minnesota, Utah, among others), at Oxford and Cambridge and Chowan and Handelshögskolan, on the staffs and advisory boards of several encyclopedias and important dictionaries, among students of English and the law and folklore and names and psychology and education and philology and more. They are acquaintances or friends or colleagues or students, but all of them are admirers.

When the pace of Brooklyn Heights became too much for her, Professor Bryant retired to a health care facility named Clemson Downs. It had the attraction of being in South Carolina and close to Clemson University and its cultural advantages. Typically, in 1989 the American Association of University Women in Clemson made her a life member. Typically, at the nursing home Professor Bryant was elected president of the residents and she arranged

for those who were able to take luncheon in the garden room to enjoy their meals with a beautiful view of the Blue Ridge Mountains and a lot of lively conversation. She was still taking care of people around Clemson as she had done since she was 21 years old and started to teach in a tiny mountain hamlet called Jocassee. The town is now under water (a recreational artificial lake covers it, part of some hydroelectric scheme) but around the area people still remember "Maggie Mae." Her tombstone reads simply "Margaret M. Bryant, Educator," along with these lines from Shelley:

> Life, like a dome of many-coloured glass,
> Stains the white radiance of eternity,
> Until Death tramples it to fragments.

Margaret M. Bryant died, full of years, content, never complaining, always as active as she could be, on 15 July 1993. She is survived by South Carolina relatives: her younger sister (Mrs. Dexter Jeter of Ware Shoals), three nieces (Mrs. Marian Jeter Woolsey of Aiken, Mrs. Clara Jeter Jeffrey of Spartanburg, Mrs. Harriet Jeter Rice of Six Mile) and a nephew (Dexter Groves Jeter of Greenville). The rest of her grieving "family" consists of a wide range of scholars in various linguistic disciplines, richer for having known her, poorer in her passing.

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