



## IN MEMORIAM:

Distinguished Professor and  
Professor Emerita of English,  
Gertrude White, 1915–2009

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*[The Oakland University Community mourned the passing of Gertrude White, Professor Emerita of English, in 2009. **The Oakland Journal** is grateful to Distinguished Professor Jane Eberwein, Professor Emeritus Brian Murphy, Professor Brian Conery and Associate Professor Jeffrey Insko for their assistance with this collective memorial to Professor White and her remarkable ability to inspire students and colleagues]*

### ***Beloved Professor***

*Jane Eberwein*

Gertrude M. White, one of the most beloved and admired members of Oakland University's charter faculty and a founding member of our Department of English, died August 13, 2009 at the age of 94. Although she had retired in 1981, she remained a dedicated friend of the university and continued to enjoy visits from alumni friends and colleagues whom she dazzled with her unfailing aptness in quoting poetry as well as her thoughtful interest in their well-being.

A native Rhode Islander, Gertrude Mason earned her bachelor's degree at Mount Holyoke College, her master's degree at Columbia University, and her doctorate at the University of Chicago, where she wrote her doctoral dissertation



under the direction of Ronald Crane (founder of the “Chicago School” of literary critics). After her marriage to William White in 1952, they lived in England while Bill completed doctoral study at the University of London and then settled in the Detroit area when he took a position teaching Journalism and American Studies at Wayne State University. Two sons, Geoffrey (named for Chaucer) and

Roger (named for her ancestor, Roger Williams) soon arrived, growing up in the Whites’ book-filled, pet-enlivened, and hospitable home in Franklin.



*A notable English Department in this area refused to consider any woman for a tenure-track appointment.*

Despite her exceptional academic accomplishments and teaching experience at the University of Chicago, McGill University, the University of Maryland, and Wayne State, however, Gertrude found few career opportunities in higher education. The chair of a notable English department in this area acknowledged her qualifications but refused to consider any woman for a tenure-track appointment. For a while,

she did radio book reviews for Hudson’s department store. Later, she taught literature and biblical history at Cranbrook’s Kingswood School. Then, when Oakland University was founded, Chancellor Durwood Varner hired Dr. White as one of the charter faculty upon recommendation of two mothers of her Kingswood pupils who recognized her suitability for this new academic venture. One of these mothers was Mrs. Roger Kyes, and it was because of her great respect for Professor White that she and her husband endowed Oak-

land's first scholarship, designating it specifically for English majors.



*Gertrude thrived  
in the hopeful  
environment of the  
young university.*

Although hired initially on a nine-month contract, Gertrude White greeted this new opportunity with eagerness and turned out to be an ideal choice for teaching at this experimental and academically ambitious university where she was the oldest member of the faculty. Always an enthusiastic learner, she loved developing new courses and displayed an exceptional range of capability, happily teaching in the Western Institutions program as well as English and offering classes in Chaucer, Shakespeare, and Faulkner as well as poetry and Victorian literature. Another of her delights was team-teaching, whether with Marilyn Williamson in her own department or Melvin Chernov from History, Dolores Burdick from Modern Languages, or Clark Heston from Philosophy. Despite her elite educational advantages, Gertrude brought varied, practical teaching experience and took a more realistic attitude than many of her colleagues to the challenges of teaching students of sharply varying capabilities and levels of preparation. In Paul Tomboulian's interview with her for the *Oakland University Chronicles*, she commented wittily on the problems faculty faced in those early years with establishing and maintaining academic standards. "In this business about lowering standards," she remarked, "I would hate to stand before a tribunal of people from the University of Chicago, where I took my doctorate, and talk about lowering standards, but you really have to deal with what you have got. If you are a cook and you have got chili, you can't make a soufflé. And you cannot give people what they are not equipped to take. So that I think that it is necessary and sensible to temper the wind to the shorn lamb, and give them as much as you can and as high a standard as you can, but remember that things aren't the way they were with Socrates and Plato." Of course, she also found exception-

ally able and responsive students for whom education at early Oakland opened long-term opportunities. She thrived in the hopeful environment of the young university, recalling later that “I was having the time of my life, because . . . those early years were just sort of out of this world, they really were.”



*A model of  
scholarly energy*

When I was hired in 1969, Gertrude was introduced to me by then-chairman Robert Hoopes as the best teacher in the department. She was a generous teacher of teachers, serving as mentor and friend to junior faculty—including myself. Never one to pursue popularity, Gertrude could intimidate students with her formidable intellect and patrician manner until they discovered her merciful temperament and nurturing support for their talents. Her teaching emanated from a passionate, lifelong love for literature coupled with authentic concern for individual students. The advice she gave in the Tombouliau interview came from experience: “It is my impression and opinion, firmer than ever in my old age, that you cannot teach anyone how to teach. . . . What you have to do is grab somebody who really loves something and force them into a classroom and say, ‘Make these people love it.’”

She was also a model of scholarly energy, writing *Wilfred Owen* for Twayne’s English Authors Series (1969) and co-authoring a book on the sonnet with Joan Rosen. Her articles on topics ranging from Chaucer’s “Franklin’s Tale” to E. M. Forster’s *Passage to India* appeared in *PMLA*, *Sewanee Review*, *Philological Quarterly*, *Victorian Studies*, and *Criticism* among other journals. Early publications had to be written in the few weeks each year between the end of Oakland’s winter semester and her sons’ liberation from schools, but she continued writing well into retirement, often contributing to the *Chesterton Review* and to the *Oakland Journal*.

In a new university, there were frequent calls on faculty for service commitments, and Gertrude toiled on her full share of departmental and university committees—serving as coordi-

nator of English in the days before departments and spending twelve years as an elected member of the University Senate. During my first semester at Oakland, she served on the Senate Steering Committee that faced the awkward task of meeting with staff of State Senator Robert Huber, who—in the light of an indiscreet, if comical, episode of male nudity during student presentations on Yeats in Professor Thomas Fitzsimons’s class—was intent on demonstrating that Oakland faculty were corrupting students by encouraging political activism and moral turpitude. As Gertrude recounted that meeting, she reported that faculty simply held to their normal teaching roles. When challenged to declare what percentage of their faculty colleagues were “activists” or “radicals,” she responded by calmly directing her questioners to define their terms—something they had apparently never considered. It turned out, she reported, that “activists” were faculty members who taught without wearing neckties. Another unwelcome assignment that she handled with reluctant grace was the role of AAUP press spokesperson during the faculty strike in fall 1971, a task to which she found herself assigned just as she returned from a year’s leave. More enjoyably, she played Old Judas, the melodramatic villainess, in the 1969 faculty production of “Under the Gas Lights.”



*To the end,  
Gertrude  
remained  
passionate about  
literature*

A venturesome couple, Gertrude and Bill White occasionally absented themselves for teaching opportunities elsewhere—notably in South Korea in 1963–64 and Boston in 1970–71. Bill eventually joined the Oakland faculty to launch the Journalism program, and both Whites retired in 1981. Honors continued to follow Gertrude: a special College of Arts and Sciences Teaching Excellence Award and appointment as Distinguished Professor of English Emerita. In retirement, she and Bill taught in Israel and in Florida, lived briefly in California, visited their older son and his family in Australia, and settled for a while near the University

of Virginia. When Bill's health declined, they returned to Michigan. Bill died in 1995 after a long and happy marriage. Gertrude mourned deeply for him and for many friends over the years but continued writing, attending university events such as the annual Maurice Brown poetry readings, and getting together with former students and colleagues. She liked keeping up with university news and was always especially curious about how many women were on the faculty.

Despite her performance skills as a professor and her many warm social interactions, Gertrude pursued a lifelong spiritual journey that was largely private, even lonely. Raised as a New England Congregationalist, she immersed herself in the academic world of the mid-twentieth century and found herself first attracted to its ethos of disbelief and then quietly resisting it. Although her husband and many friends remained skeptical of religious claims, Gertrude joined the Episcopal church and then, on her return from Virginia some years after her retirement, surprised me by announcing her plans to be received into the Catholic church and asking me to be her sponsor. Although never reconciled to a lectionary based on scriptural translations not found in the King James Bible, she determined that the most "complete" commitment to Christianity led to Rome, "pope and all." My sense is that G. K. Chesterton and Gerard Manley Hopkins had more influence on her conversion than any doctrinal study. Yet she remained open to all forms of worship, even joining Jewish friends at *shabbat* services in one of the senior residences where she lived in recent years—but only so long as she felt confident the Hebrew would be read well.

Right to the end, Gertrude remained passionate about literature. Last winter, she was reading a biography of Samuel Johnson that was a Christmas gift from her son Roger. She had stacks of books around her and often recited apt passages from Shakespeare, Yeats, and other favorite poets. At the end of one of my visits this spring, she asked me to locate her Robert Frost volume in one of her bookshelves and leave it with her to re-read favorites from *A Boy's Will*. The last stanza of the final

poem in that book, "Reluctance," comes to my mind often these days as I remember Gertrude White

Ah, when to the heart of man  
Was it ever less than a treason  
To go with the drift of things,  
To yield with a grace to reason,  
And bow and accept the end  
Of a love or a season?

### *She Said Things I'll Never Forget*

*Robert McGowan*

*[Written for her 90th birthday, edited on the occasion of her passing]*

Entering my combination English and Western Civilizations course on the first day of class of my freshman year at Oakland University, I noted that the tables were arranged in a rectangle accommodating 20 or so students. There were two professors, one at each end of the room. They called it the Cherno-White College. The year was 1961.

The two-semester course had no textbook. We read in paperback the works of Thucydides, Descartes, Pascal, the Venerable Bede and on and on. Our first assignment was to read and outline the first 100 pages of the *History of the Peloponnesian War*. I was 17 years old.

The class was based on dialog and inquiry, between the teachers and students, and sometimes between the teachers themselves. We experienced the works directly, mainlining ideas, as it were. I remember while leaving class one day mentioning to Gertrude that Nietzsche seemed to be a harbinger of Freud. She, Mel and I, mostly they, discussed it for several minutes in the hallway. It was for me a sublime moment.

I was in awe of Gertrude. She had committed to memory

more poetry than I had read. She would recite beautifully, her head tilted back, her eyes closed. The class was transfixed. On ending, she'd pause a moment, room completely still, look up, and smile. It was intoxicating; I always wanted more.

She also introduced me to *The Stuffed Owl: An Anthology of Bad Verse*. This was poetry by fine, sometimes great, poets, such as Wordsworth, who happened to hit a clinker, perhaps several. As an example (probably not from the book, as I think about it, but never mind) she quoted, "Dante stands with one foot in the middle ages and, with the other, salutes the rising Renaissance."

When I said something about putting Descartes before the hearse, she reminded me, in a deep, mock-serious voice, that, while a pun is the lowest form of humor, I didn't have to drag it through the mud. I can still see her eyes twinkling, her smile.

Gertrude instilled and furthered my love of literature, and of poetry in particular. She said things I'll never forget. During a class discussion on knowledge, she said that among the most important benefits of a liberal arts education was learning how to use one's free time. In this and in so many things, for more than a few decades, you were my mentor, madam. Thank you.

## ***For Gertrude White, "Regrets"***

*Millie Steere*

You touched my life  
but never knew the consequences  
you left for me to discover.  
Not much, one would determine –  
only to search for that elusive word.  
Much more, though, is the depth charge  
of inspiration to find the soul.  
How I appreciated you  
and still do.  
I wish you knew.  
I thank you too late.



## ***“What Is This World?”***

*Warren Keith Wright*

On 25 September 1975, as a junior-year English major, I was summoned to Professor White’s fifth-floor Wilson Hall office to discuss serving as student representative on the Undergraduate Programs Committee. In those days, you ran background checks on faculty by visiting the basement bookstore in the old Oakland Center and consulting a stenciled compendium of Instructor Evaluations. Gertrude M. White’s write-ups either called her great and inspiring or swore that as a grader she was hard and even mean.

Long afterward she recalled my looking in at her door and tentatively asking, “Professor White?” Nothing survives of that interview, except that I did attend the weekly Committee meetings (and observed the politics operative in even the most amiable of departments); and that, thanks to some remark of mine, she wound up wondering, “Just how old do you think I am?”

Being only 20 (and a very young 20 at that), unaware that she was an “Old Oak,” a veteran of OU’s founding years, I hazarded, “50?” That I missed the mark by a decade tickled her no end.

January found me in a course devoted to one of Professor White’s specialties, Chaucer. She patiently schooled us in the intricacies of Middle English, and by exploring various *Canterbury Tales*, then *Troilus and Criseyde*, imbued us with her deep affection and affinity for Chaucer’s humanity. What delicate, decisive import she gave those haunted lines from “The Knight’s Tale”:

*“What is this world? What asketh men to have?  
Now with his love, now in his colde grave,  
Alone, withouten any compaignye.”*

As a grad student I took her Victorian poetry seminar, and in Kresge Library, under her tutelage, we learned every

fundamental of literary scholarship while appraising Tennyson's melancholy ("The woods decay, the woods decay and fall"), Arnold's modernity ("Where ignorant armies clash by night"), and Browning's *crackling* technique (a vision of a fourteenth-century auto-da-fé, "The Heretic's Tragedy"). Her passion for poetry fed the poet-in-training in me, and with her encouragement I wrote a senior essay on the life-work of that penetrating lyricist and critic, Louise Bogan.



*Asparagus,  
chocolate mousse,  
and long talks*

By that time, as a regular visitor to the Whites' home on West 14 Mile in Franklin, Gertrude had fed me much else too: asparagus, quiche, chocolate mousse, Dry Sack—she was a splendid cook and hostess. I can still see the front yard's large white metal sculpture, designed by their elder son Geoffrey (whom I met only once); her study, with its heterodox array of books (how on earth had she met up with Félicien Rops?); her husband Bill's study, shelves crammed with international Hemingway editions, desk stacked with typescripts, proofs, and off-prints, as befitted a journalism professor and master bibliographer; the kitchen which boasted, still in service, one of the first dishwashers ever produced; two huge housecats, which younger son Roger sometimes had to quarantine—Duffy, the cross-eyed cashmere-eating Siamese, and Monsignor Joseph T. Cambodia the Third (aka Joe); the modern art prints and tabletop sculptures in the living room, with windows north and south, and a Regency fireplace. . . . I loved going there, though each visit challenged me to act more confident than my gawky social self actually felt.

Such maturation came about, in part, during many long talks with Gertrude. She recounted her experiences as a young woman at the University of Chicago, home of the venerable Manly-Rickert edition of Chaucer, where she took her doctorate and encountered the Scots literary scholar David Daiches, whom I met at their house in April 1980. I surprised her by

tracking down *You Will Die Today!*—“A Red Badge Detective Mystery,” 1953, dedicated “To My Mother” (who died on Christmas Day, 1952). Had I picked it up in a used book shop I’d have fingered “R. I. Wakefield” as Gertrude: the title, and the titles of each chapter, are phrases from Housman, another enthusiasm she and Bill shared. “ ‘Terence, this is stupid stuff!’ ” she wrote on my copy’s front flyleaf. “A voice from the past . . . to the present . . . and *you* I don’t really mind reading it.” My doing so prompted a discussion of murder, its motives and possible justifications, such as preserving that one thing which a person values above all else. With relish she drolly quoted, “There are few situations in life that cannot be honourably settled, and without loss of time, either by suicide, a bag of gold, or by thrusting a despised antagonist over the edge of a precipice upon a dark night.” That came from another of the Whites’ penchants, Ernest Bramah’s tales concerning the storyteller Kai Lung, recounted in elegant faux-“Mandarin” English. Other pithy aphorisms were Gertrude’s own: “No outsider ever knows what goes on inside a marriage.” But to hear the two of them remember attending the Indy 500 when the boys were young, so Bill could file immediate eyewitness accounts with the Rochester *Clarion*, or her complaints about traveling with “the monster” (“This man *never* has to go to the bathroom!”) left no doubt that their union was both deep and cheerful.



**Gertrude:**  
*what’s in a name?*

For those visits were hardly all academic high-mindedness. One night before supper the TV was tuned to a show about exotic fauna. Upon seeing one presenter, Gertrude imitated a favorite cartoon critter, Sylvester the Cat: “Sufferin’ succotash, that’s Burgess Meredith! He was an old man when I was a little girl!” She was indignant that an ungainly jungle bird turned out to be her namesake. “Whenever they give an ugly animal a name, they always choose ‘Gertrude!’” Turning to me she asked, “Did you know that the Pocket Books kangaroo mas-

cot is called 'Gertrude' too?" I didn't mention Hamlet's mother.

The flow of fresh ideas did continue through the books she lent me—F. L. Lucas's *Decline and Fall of the Romantic Ideal* (1936, still a startlingly modern book); Elinor Wylie's *Collected Poems* ("As I went down by Havre de Grace. . . ."); *Journey from Obscurity*, a family memoir by Harold Owen, brother of Wilfred (Twayne published Gertrude's book on his work and life); David Daiches's memoir *Was: A Pastime from Time Past*; Belloc's and Chesterton's poems, and *The Man Who Was Thursday*. . . . She wrote often for Father Ian Boyd at *The Chesterton Review*, including critiques of Muriel Spark's later novels. "This one I'm not ashamed of," she claimed of the anthology she collaborated on with Joan Rosen, *A Moment's Monument: The Development of the Sonnet* (1972). Two PMLA classics, "A Passage to India: Analysis and Revaluation" (1953), and "'The Franklin's Tale': Chaucer and the Critics" (1974), were much admired and reprinted; but another journal's repeated postponement of an article's appearance made her marvel, "I don't know how anyone lives long enough to get published in an annual."



*Letters from  
Greece and the  
windmills of  
Mykonos*

Despite this record, Gertrude lamented her lack of ambition, whether about writing or one of her perennial diets (though she possessed a nostalgic hour-glass figure). She credited it to "a New England conscience—strong enough to make you miserable, but not strong enough to make you change." Nonetheless, she made starts on several murder mysteries (a genre she read incessantly) and a memoir, *The Houses of Memory* (titled after Blake), structured round the far-flung places they had lived. Special-occasion verses she could turn out on demand, chagrined that she had no hand for "serious" poetry.

But she did write innumerable, memorable letters, on pastel half-sheets and blue-bordered personal postcards precisely filled with print, tapped out on a portable whose distinc-

tive typeface seemed the visual equivalent of her voice. She wrote from Greece, amid the windmills of Mykonos; from Haifa, Israel, where she and Bill had accepted teaching appointments during a very dangerous period; from Australia, while visiting their granddaughters, in whom she took great delight.



***A living  
anthology***

Gertrude never lost her gift for surprise, as when she gave me, for my birthday once, the Book of Common Prayer; and later—strange bedfellows!—Camille Paglia’s *Break, Blow, Burn* (titled after Donne), with 43 poems granted exemplary close readings. I was the one to hunt out, for her and Bill, Walter de la Mare’s 1946 lyric anthology *Love* (which includes Vita Sackville-West’s magnificent “The greater cats with golden eyes”); but Gertrude was a *living* anthology. I might mention a line from “The Cloud,” by Shelley (“I silently laugh at my own cenotaph”), but she knew them all: “And out of the caverns of rain, / Like a child from the womb, like a ghost from the tomb, / I arise and unbuild it again.” When I won the Department’s Ekphrasis Poetry Contest in 2005 (and then, almost inadvertently, in 2007), the best part was sharing the news with her. She was the sort of person you were proud to make feel proud of you.



***Laughter  
was the keynote***

In her memoir, years earlier, she had written, “A loving heart will suffer at any age, nor is it a consolation to know that deeper griefs await it.” Bill’s death was a loss she endured but never overcame; such is the tax exacted by love. “The flower is gone; now I must sell the bran,” she would echo the Wife of Bath, alongside Frost’s “Provide, provide!” Phone conversations in later years, when we were far apart, invariably adverted to our mutual hero, Dr. Johnson, eloquently celebrated in Walter Jackson Bate’s *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson*—though sometimes it proved difficult to follow his lead and “find new topicks of mer-

riment, or new incitements to curiosity.” But I’d also heard both Bill and Gertrude cite, laughingly, the Doctor’s dictum that second marriages were “the triumph of hope over experience”; and laughter was the keynote of many White family anecdotes, her mirth coming in little contralto gasps, as her eyes squinted and twinkled.

One such story, which Gertrude never tired of telling, dealt with an older student she once had, a free-spoken loose-cannon “faculty spouse,” as they were then called. She came to the office to protest a hard grade, given to an essay which contended that Edmund Wilson was full of a noun not uncommon in Middle English. When Gertrude mildly suggested that this word did not quite suit scholarly discourse, the woman stood up and, in one mighty sweep, shoved everything on the desk onto the floor, then reared back and, shaking her finger, thundered, “*You—have a long way—to GO—and GROW—and BE!*”—A few minutes after she took leave, another undergrad, looking in at the door, asked Gertrude, sitting stunned amid the debris, “Professor White—are you all right?”



*Lasting  
influence*

Now, working as proofreader for The Library of America on texts that range from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Philip K. Dick, I find that everything taught me by Gertrude, and the English Department, and the OU community comes to my aid, for you cannot properly proofread a classic unless you understand where it comes from. My first LOA assignment was two volumes of Edmund Wilson’s essays, including his evocation of Edna St. Vincent Millay, whose sonnets Gertrude taught me to love: “See where Capella with her golden kids / Grazes the slope between the east and north. . . .” And wherever I come upon a passage from Chaucer, and find myself still able to read it, I recall her reciting these lines from his “Balade de bon Conseyll.” (“Ghost” signifies one’s inner spirit, and the last phrase means “never fear.”)

Her is non hoom, her nis but wilderness;  
Forth, pilgrim, forth! Forth, beste, out of thy stal!  
Know thy countree, look up, thank God of al;  
Hold the heye wey, and lat thy ghost thee lede;  
And trouthe thee shal delivere, it is no drede.

## *A Moment's Monument*

*Joan Rosen*

I first met Gertrude White when I came to Michigan as a new bride and a recent Vassar College graduate with a BA in English. Gertrude was already teaching English at Kingswood School, Cranbrook. I was terrified because this was my first “real” job. Gertrude immediately recognized my terror, calmed me down, inspired me with her confidence, and told me, as no one else could, “to stop being foolish and get right in there.” From the moment she first spoke to me, I knew I had found a friend and a mentor. We established a relationship in that year at Kingswood which would last for the rest of her life. She encouraged me, she prodded me, she allowed me to observe her teaching; she taught me more about loving literature than I had learned in four years of college, and she is the reason that I aspired to university teaching. She put me on what we now call “a career path” which I have followed and which I have loved all of my life.

Gertrude and her husband, Bill, together with my husband, Bob, became the closest of friends. Even when the Whites were off on their travels to places such as South Korea and Israel, we communicated often by mail and by phone. Together we spent week-ends, especially at Stratford, where we enjoyed plays, criticized performance, often arguing and then laughing at our “reviews.” We shared some points of view and disagreed heartily about others, but always with a great deal of affection.



*Her cooking was  
as good as her  
teaching*

Some of the most delightful evenings Bob and I spent in the first few years of our marriage were the “soirees” at the White’s home in Franklin. Gertrude was a marvelous cook who delighted in French cooking adapted to her New England style. Few could put Rhode Island and Paris together in the kitchen as Gertrude did. Her cooking was as good as her teaching—varied, surprising, delicious, and not to be forgotten, especially the soufflé.

Perhaps more important than the food she provided for us at those lovely parties was the nourishment she gave me as she recited the poetry she loved, and led me into a cornucopia of tantalizing literary banquets.



*Incomparable  
friendship,  
mentorship and  
encouragement*

Just before Gertrude left Kingswood to begin her career at Oakland University, she convinced me to go to graduate school at Wayne State University where I applied for and received a graduate assistantship. She believed in me and, as so many of you know, it was that certainty she had about what each of us could accomplish that pushed me into a place I never thought I would be. We spent that first year of my graduate studies talking about my work and her first exciting year at Oakland, sharing both our joys and our occasional lack of patience with both teachers and colleagues. We talked often about poetry: I was interested in Yeats as poet and playwright; Gertrude gently pushed me into writing an essay on Yeats, which I could never have done at that stage of my life without her encouragement.

At the conclusion of Gertrude’s second year at Oakland, she asked me to apply for a part-time teaching position there. I could not believe it. Even though I had not completed the PhD, she told me that the Department of English needed someone to work with the freshman writing program and to teach one literature course; there was no doubt in her mind



that I was that person. I remember exactly what she said. “Don’t argue with me or tell me that you can’t do this job; of course you can and you will.” All I had to do was meet with Robert Hoopes, Department Chair. Well, I did—there begins the tale of my association with Oakland. For the next thirty-five years years I remained a member of the English Department faculty. I credit everything that I accomplished in academia to the friendship, mentorship, and encouragement of Gertrude Mason White.



*Friends,  
Colleagues, and  
Lovers of  
Literature  
and Its History*

Gertrude and I, at her suggestion, wrote *A Moment’s Monument*, an anthology of sonnets. She came to me, asked that I be co-author; again, she would not allow me to say no. It was on that project that I really learned how to do research, how to read galleys, how to trust my own judgment about the poems. We would talk for hours about inclusions and exclusions—what made each sonnet special, why one made the cut and another did not. Working out our definition of the sonnet form together clarified much for both of us. She taught me that to define one looks within the work, as it contains its own identification. I am forever grateful for the lessons I learned while writing with Gertrude. Her presence, her sense of the appropriate, her knowledge of the poems and their history amazed me. I always felt I would never be as brilliant as she, but it never mattered to her or to me—we were friends, we were colleagues, and we shared our love of literature and its history.

I know that literature, especially poetry, sustained Gertrude to the very end of her life. Equally important, however, was friendship and love. She and Bill remained friends and lovers until he passed away fifteen years ago. She nurtured her sons, Geoffrey and Roger, providing them with the best—opportunities to travel and opportunities to learn. Nothing gave her more pleasure than spending time with Bill and the boys. I remember, a summer day in 1958 when the four Whites

and the two Rosens were enjoying an outing at the Jonah Pool on the grounds of Cranbrook. Gertrude was the swimming instructor; Bill was the designated lifeguard. All four splashed, laughed, and thrashed, delighting in each other's antics. They seemed to me the perfect family. Gertrude cared not only for her family, but also for her friends; she kept in touch with people all over the world, telling me often how much she loved her Israeli friends, wishing always that she could go back and see them. She mourned the loss of many of those to whom she was devoted—her brother, Tilden, her Franklin neighbors, college friends, graduate school professors, and colleagues. Every loss was a blow to her; with each one some of the love and the light disappeared from her life.

When I think of my friend, I reflect on our definition of the sonnet, which Gertrude personified: her beauty came from deep within her soul. For me, she was and always will be poetry, which Rossetti described as “a moment's monument”.

## *New England For You*

*Brian Murphy*

Gertrude White, nee Mason, was born in Rhode Island . . . and she never forgot it.

The main character of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* complained that he was not promoted at his New England prep school because all the men who went away to the war all came back. “Not a single man got his head shot off: that's New England for you.” Gertrude had a *great* deal of that flinty, indomitable spirit.

Educated at Mount Holyoke, then Columbia, and receiving her PhD from the University of Chicago, she came to Oakland University as a member of the charter faculty and, in her passion for literature, especially poetry, her love of teaching, the brilliance and depth of her scholarship, she embodied and helped shape the University's ideals from the very beginning.



*Gertrude White*

She received a rare tribute to the power of her scholarly and critical acumen when a friend, the great critic David Daiches, showed her now-classic PMLA article on *A Passage to India* to its author, E. M. Forster. Daiches said that Forster took the article to his rooms at Cambridge, then came back after reading it, and said, in his characteristically mild manner, “Yes, yes, very good, I must have meant something like that.”



***Legendary parties,  
amazing dinners***

Gertrude always seemed to be bursting with humor—how she loved to laugh!—with life, with love for people and literature, even with indignation at some of the wilder excess of The Sixties—or even some of the milder excesses of any time; she rather liked to burst with indignation, and she burst brilliantly.

She loved great poetry, but she loved the bawdy as well: she possessed an apparently inexhaustible store of naughty limericks.

The parties at the house she shared in Franklin with her beloved husband Bill were themselves legendary. The dinners were amazing, the talk was brilliant, the fun palpable. One exchange she reported caught something of the spirit perfectly:

she said that she and OU's founding Chancellor, "Woody" Varner, were discussing the new mores of the students arriving in The Sixties. Woody reported that he asked a student who was smoking marijuana (in the Oakland Center! Imagine the scene!) why he smoked it.

Woody reported the student's response: it makes sex better.

Gertrude reported a longish pause as she and Woody looked at each other and contemplated this answer.

Then Woody said, "Gertrude, if it were any 'better,' I couldn't stand it!"

Hers has been a unique legacy, and she really was "New England for you."

## *The "Grande Dame"*

*Dolores Burdick*

Arriving at OU when it was still being hailed as "the Harvard of the Midwest", I knew Gertrude almost from the very beginning. Even in those early days, we all saw her as our "grande dame," the very doyenne and champion of all things literary. In retrospect, it's hard to remember how very young she was, and already being held in such high esteem among colleagues and students.

I think of those years as OU's "classical" age (we still had a Classics Department!) It was during that era that OU was running an experimental program called the Freshman Exploratory. Incoming students were asked to read a particular book in advance, and then convene in seminars to discuss it with a faculty member prior to the opening of regular classes. One year the required reading was *Antigone* by Sophocles. Gertrude and I were each assigned a seminar, which happened to be meeting in adjoining classrooms.

I shall never forget running into her in the hallway just beforehand. Humbled by the prospect of dealing with a giant

like Sophocles, I had been fretting about the assignment the entire previous day, but Gertrude looked fresh as a daisy. “Oh Gertrude,” I murmured, “What are you going to say?”

“I have no idea,” she replied with a wink and smile. “I never really know until I hear it coming out of my mouth.”

Galvanized by such a display of confidence, I walked into my classroom quite transformed. I cannot recall what I ended up saying about *Antigone*, I only know I was able to smile at the students as I waited to hear what was going to come out of my mouth. I do recall that the seminar was something of a success, and that I owe that success to my encounter with Gertrude. This is my chance to pay her my debt of teacherly gratitude.

She always had something fresh to offer in the way of an idea. Whether it was during a trip we shared to Stratford, or a course we team-taught, or parties we hosted together, Gertrude was always a source of inspiration. Above all, she possessed the talent of devotion. No one valued friendship more than she did, nor served it better. I shall miss her always.

## ***A 4.3 on a 4.0 Scale***

*Nigel Hampton*

Using Oakland’s original grading system, Gertrude was easily a 4.3, whether she was being evaluated as teacher, scholar, colleague or friend. Like many others, I benefited from Gertrude’s wisdom and generosity. She was without guile or ambiguity; her knowing smile said it all: at once gentle and equally penetrating, alerting me on more than one occasion at departmental meetings to consider most seriously the validity of my comments. Gertrude’s smile is what I remember most—no moments of anger or vitriol—and it is what I think of now at her passing. She was a wonderful person and I shall miss her greatly.

## *Making the Devil Blink*

*Jim Hoyle*

When Gertrude and I taught English together we were both devout Episcopalians. She managed to be a believer. I still manage to be an atheist. She loved to recite to me that “Easter Hymn” by the best of atheists, A. E. Housman, where he admits the possibility of—believe it or not—Christianity.

I don’t know where Gertrude is, and, to invoke Lord Byron, neither do you. If she is in heaven, she is bored stiff. If she is in purgatory, she is one of the good mountain climbers. If she is in hell—and she is the first to say there’s a chance—she looks the devil into his squinty evil eye, and the devil, I think, blinks.

## *The Look*

*Linda McCloskey*

It was what I came to call *The Look*. With the slightest tilt of her head, she would stare at me, a side-long penetrating glance really, not saying a word, but letting me know in no uncertain terms whether she was pleased . . . or not. Occasionally, she would give herself away too soon, as when the corners of her mouth would curl up ever so slightly, or, every now and then, downward.

This woman, who possessed the most remarkable internal lexicon, could send a message loud and clear without uttering a word.

The first time I saw *The Look* was in the midst of my first time lecturing as a graduate assistant. The course was Eng 105—Shakespeare. The play: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. The classroom in O’Dowd Hall was enormous, so I had to use a microphone, which only served to draw even more attention to my trembling voice and uncontrollable I-am-new-at-this nervousness. I wanted to run, or at least faint, so that the students

would be sent away, allowing me to recover, never to step foot in a classroom again.

As I attempted to relay the importance of Shakespeare's use of comedy in the play, I stopped mid-sentence and turned to look at Gertrude, who was sitting about five feet to my left, arms folded across her chest, not staring at me, but at the students. She did not look pleased.

Then I saw her gaze shift ever so slowly from the rows of uninterested students to me. Her eyes were the only part of her body that moved, and *The Look* may as well have been a six-foot neon sign that all but shouted:

*Do NOT give up!*  
*Do NOT give in to them!*  
*Keep going, Miss Linda!*

I turned back to face the students and finished that lecture, voice still quivering and knees still knocking right up to the end. I did not ask Gertrude what she thought about the job I did. I already knew, because I had not quit.

They would be many more encounters with *The Look* over the next twenty-four years, but not nearly enough. I was enormously lucky to experience the ones I did, and fortunate indeed to know this beautiful woman, who was remarkable in so many ways.

## ***From Terrified Freshman to Mentee and Friend***

*James H. Drummond*

Just a few days more than a half century ago, I arrived on the campus of MSUO, a 17 year old freshman in what would come to be known as the Charter Class. The first class I attended was the beginning English course that had been assigned me. I was fresh off the farm, away from home for the first time. I wanted to become a high school English teacher, but I was absolutely

terrified. There were only freshmen and thus no one could point to anyone having succeeded in a previous year or even quarter. My fears were justified. There were more failing grades that first quarter than there were students enrolled.

But that English class I entered was taught by Dr. Gertrude Mason White. I was in awe of her knowledge and expertise. She was, sadly and frighteningly, not impressed by what I wrote in the first essay I submitted. She asked me to come to see her, and of course I did, trembling as I entered her office. She suggested that I was not ready for college English. I was devastated and asked if I could rewrite the paper. I explained that my high school English teacher had been the football coach. She agreed to let me revise the paper. I rewrote it five times before resubmitting it. The paper was given a B, and my quest to become an English teacher began in earnest.

Dr. White was my English professor all three quarters of my first year. (MSUO, like its parent, MSU, was on the quarter system then.) I then signed up for her poetry course as a first-term sophomore. Her patience, guidance, and enthusiasm for her subject led me to take several more courses from her. Eventually, I returned to be her graduate associate as I earned a Master's degree. Once again, I took multiple courses from her.



*I learned how to  
teach from her*

No one, save for my parents, had more influence on my life than Gertrude White. She was much more than a good teacher and scholar. She was a great teacher who loved what she taught and whom she taught. She was brilliant, and I loved her. She was not only my mentor but became my dear friend as well. During the fifty years we knew each other, we were never out of touch. I became a close friend of Bill, her husband, and even attended a World Series game in 1968 with him. I remember vividly how Bill had told her he had tickets to the fifth game of the series. He was very excited, and she replied,

“Bill, it’s only a baseball game to me. Why don’t you take



Jim?” It turned out to be the pivotal game of the series, and Bill and I talked about the game for years.

I had watched their sons grow up, and then the Whites were a part of my children’s lives as they grew up. I named my first son, Thomas Mason Drummond, after her. I remember the pain and loss I felt when Gertrude called me to tell me that Bill had died after his long illness. Now, of course, Gertrude is gone, too, leaving a chasm in my life. Many East African cultures believe that when someone dies, that event leaves a hole in the universe. The loss of Gertrude White certainly left a hole in my universe.

While attending a seminar on teaching, I was asked to describe the best teacher I had ever had in one word. Fifty or a hundred words would be much easier than limiting myself to one. I really struggled to limit myself to a single word. Eventually, I wrote down “gracious.” There were, of course, many other words I could think of, but when I told Gertrude, many years later, what I had written, she seemed genuinely pleased with my choice.

I learned a great deal about writing and about literature from her. Even more importantly, I learned how to teach from her and how to win over students’ trust and confidence. Let me conclude by slightly misquoting a couplet from her favorite poet.

Sownynge in moral vertu was her speche,  
And gladly wolde she lerne and gladly teche.

## ***One of Six Founding Faculty***

*Shelly Appleton*

Gertrude was one of six founding faculty of Charter College, an inner college which began in 1965 and accepted students who requested admission without regard to grades or test scores. (The other faculty were Mel Chernob, Bill Hammerle,

Fred Lessing, Roger Marz, and I). Each faculty member chose a book for all (150+) freshmen to read and gave a lecture defending that choice. Gertrude chose Conrad's *Three Great Tales* (including *Heart of Darkness* before it became the template for Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*). In addition to defending that choice, Gertrude gave a poetry reading that drew an ovation from the freshmen. I remember particularly her reading of "Sally from our Alley," because I had always thought of it as kind of silly, but by the time Gertrude finished reading it I was fighting back tears.

I recall also a meeting of either the University Senate or the College Assembly—I forget which—in the late sixties. The students had come to demand what they called "open opens," which meant that residence halls would be always open to room visits by members of the opposite sex—a fairly shocking notion at the time to denizens of the Rochester area. Gertrude commented to the effect that she didn't want students to think that her fellow students at Mt. Holyoke had been uninterested in members of the opposite sex, but that she would oppose "open opens" because it made arranging such meetings too damn easy. She thought it was better if students learned to use a little ingenuity.

## *Forever Ageless*

*Marjorie Sandy*

Gertrude White was a wonderful teacher who made literature come to life. She was a charmer, energetic, never at a loss for words, and passionate about her work. I looked forward to her class lectures. It's hard to imagine that she is gone. I thought she would always be there at Oakland. After I left Oakland University, another former student of hers and I spent an afternoon with her. She was fun to be with, and I thought she would stay the same, forever ageless. I will always remember her with fondness.

## *Elegant Yet Earthy*

*Vikki Appleton Felden*

In my very first semester at Oakland University, I was lucky enough to end up in a pair of classes team-taught by Professors Gertrude White and Mel Chernow, which—due to a printing error in the course schedule (this being the days before computers streamlined the registration process)—comprised a total of six students. The course focused on World War I; Mel taught the history and Gertrude taught the literature: Aldous Huxley, Robert Graves, Siegfried Sassoon, Wilfred Owen, T. S. Eliot, etc. The extraordinary student/teacher ratio (as well as the extraordinary teachers) made the class a real joy, although I suspect the Powers That Be were not exactly delighted; it must have “cost” the university a small fortune.



### *Playing with words*

Our first contact was not exactly auspicious; Gertrude mortified me by calling me “Shelly” throughout that first day of class. Unfortunately, Shelly was not my name, but my father’s. He was a colleague of Gertrude’s at the university and, naturally, I was desperate that this fact should *not* become known by any of my fellow students. At one point during the class, she passed very near where I was sitting, and I took the opportunity to say—as unobtrusively as I could manage—“My name’s *not* Shelly!” She took it in her stride and apologized to me after class. She also never called me Shelly again.

Something Gertrude said during the early days of that class has remained with me for the rest of my life, although I doubt she ever realized how great an impact it had on me. We were discussing what a writer is, and she quoted some fellow who had said something like, “A great writer is not someone who has a message to impart, but simply someone who enjoys playing with words.” This made me think about writers and writing—and myself—in an *entirely* different way. While I had

always enjoyed and been “good at” English in school, I had never thought of myself as someone who might possibly become a writer, because I felt I did not have anything much to say; I figured that in order to be a ‘proper’ writer, one *did* have to have some great message to impart—or at least an important story to tell. The idea that good writing meant *playing with words* was a revelation to me—and an encouraging one. “Playing with words,” I thought. “*I can do that . . . I really like playing with words.*” Suddenly, Writing was not something done only by Great Writers, but (potentially) by mere mortals like me, as well.



***Gertrude changed  
my view of poetry***

(I would love to be able to relate that this was the turning point in my Great Literary Career, and to reveal that my writing is revered in critical circles, worldwide, but this is—sadly—not the case. However, what this change of outlook *did* do for me was allow me to feel that “playing with words” was not just fun but worthwhile in and of itself (which had never occurred to me before), and it encouraged me to continue playing with and enjoying words for the rest of my life, whether or not I ever end up writing anything that might generate even the faintest of ripples in the Literary Establishment.)

In a similar vein, Gertrude radically changed my view of poetry. BG (Before Gertrude), poetry pretty much left me cold—even though I liked words, and reading, and “that kind of thing.” I didn’t dislike poetry; it just didn’t do much for me, even when I read Great Poems by Great Poets (which I did only if it was for school). But when Gertrude recited (declaimed? imparted? no . . . perhaps *shared* is the best word to use) a poem, suddenly I could see what all the fuss was about. I’m sure many other people will say this, but Gertrude had a real gift for bringing a poem to life. In her loving ‘hands,’ the sense of the words became clearer, and their power absolutely compelling. BG, whenever I read a poem, the voice I heard in my head adhered strictly to the poem’s meter (if it had one), gen-

erally reducing even the most moving of verses to doggerel. Listening to Gertrude, I appreciated—for the first time—the delicious tension between the meter of the poem and the rhythm of individual lines.

I live in England now, where one is (a little) more likely to encounter poetry in day-to-day life, especially on the radio. It is not unusual to hear world-class actors and actresses read and recite poetry—passionately, brilliantly, and movingly, but I have yet to hear even one of them who has—in my opinion—exceeded Gertrude in full flow.

At the conclusion of the course, Mel and Gertrude invited the class over for dinner (I believe they had done this before, even with classes of considerably more than six). I don't remember in whose home we actually dined, but it was a lovely meal, and afterwards we were introduced to yet another horizon-expanding, life-changing aspect of Culture: Anna Russell singing/explaining Wagner's Ring Cycle. (If you have never heard of Ms. Russell, you have an incredible treat in store; it is still possible to buy her recordings online and/or to view her on You Tube, and trust me, you will never regret doing so.) I knew almost nothing about Wagner's music, but I laughed so hard my stomach hurt. I believe it was also the first time I heard Tom Lehrer.

By the end of the semester, I had become an English major. Not, mind you, because I had any intention whatsoever of obtaining an English degree, but because it meant I could have Gertrude as my advisor—which gave me the opportunity to continue seeing her now and then even though I was no longer in one of her classes. As it turned out, I had the treat of another class with Gertrude yet to come.



### *Reading for Fun*

In January of 1978, the Honors College was in the second semester of its first year. Its directors were keen to ensure that HC students were taught by OU's very best: master educators who had the ability to motivate and inspire—as well as teach. I can attest to this because my father

(yes, the aforementioned “Shelly”) was one of the HC’s directors, so I was well aware of the serious concern and consideration that went into selecting the faculty and staff during the crucial first years of the College. (Actually, hearing about their determination to proffer Oakland’s finest teachers is what inspired me to apply to the HC myself.) Thus it happened that Gertrude was entrusted with the care and continued nurturing of the (entire) foundation HC class in its second term, Judy Brown having had the distinction of teaching the very first term.

The course focused on Hemingway. (I have no doubt the subject matter was also carefully selected with a view to the potential for “value added” thanks to husband Bill’s status as a leading authority on Hemingway—as well as the fact that Bill’s Hemingway collection was one of the best in the world.) On the first day of class, Gertrude asked us, “Why do we read?” and the first or second answer she received (from Diane Geffert, now Diane Smith, if I remember rightly) was “For fun.” Gertrude surprised us by admitting that this was indeed the answer she had been “looking for,” but apparently the surprise was mutual; Gertrude conceded that she hadn’t expected us to come up with the “right” answer quite so soon. It seems that when she asked this question in other classes, the idea of reading for fun (sadly) rarely came up without prompting (if at all).

Years passed; I left OU (and Michigan) and pursued a career in graphic design, but Gertrude and I stayed in touch. Gertrude was good about sending succinct—but evocative—missives on plain white postcards. When she and I managed to get together, I loved hearing about her travels with Bill, their experiences teaching in exotic places, as well as their time as impoverished graduate students in (equally impoverished) post-WWII England. We also enjoyed talking about words and writing; for me, Gertrude was someone special with whom I could let down my guard and share thoughts about such things. It was a profound *pleasure* to have a good friend who so *relished* words and language. I will treasure those memories.



*Elegant yet earthy*

Judging by what I have written so far (if you didn't know Gertrude), you might by now have an impression of someone so very Cultured as to be a tad stuffy, but please banish such thoughts immediately, Gentle Readers, for such a cruel misapprehension would be folly indeed. For example. . . .

I don't remember how the subject of pornography came up in class one day (it may have had something to do with censorship and/or writing about sex explicitly, or perhaps the idea that "Less is More"), but it did. Gertrude confided in the class that when her husband Bill found out she had never seen a porn flick, he was astonished and resolved to remedy that sad state of affairs—straight away. He hustled her off to one, where, she confessed, she had "thoroughly disgraced" herself . . . by falling asleep.

Clearly, the problem with porn was not sex: it was simply its lack of subtlety. Likewise, the problem with abolishing the visiting hours curfew in the dorms was not what young men and women might get up to. Gertrude cheerfully allowed as how there was nothing going on these days that didn't happen in the good old/bad days as well; it was just that, back then, it required a great deal more in the way of determination, creativity, and ingenuity to accomplish such things—as well it should.

Elegant yet earthy, Gertrude was dignity itself—but without being stuffy, a tad on the formal side, perhaps, but never pompous; not unkind, but very direct and not afraid to speak her mind. (One of my brothers also attended OU and took a couple of courses from Gertrude. I recall him telling me about Gertrude's response to his parody of a Wordsworth poem (apparently he did not hold the original poem in quite the same high esteem as she did): "Kevin, God may forgive you for that, but I never will.")

One regret I have is that I never managed to learn Gertrude's pen name. She told me once that she had written a murder mystery-type novel—under a pen name. Intrigued, I

asked her to reveal it so that I might obtain and read the book, but she declined this request, indicating that she didn't think it was good enough to warrant the attention. Of course, this piqued my curiosity and, feeling sure that even an effort she did not herself rate highly would be well worth reading, I repeated my request, but without success. I persisted over the years, asking almost every time we met, but she never relented.

This may well explain her fondness for "Murder, She Wrote," with Angela Lansbury (an aspect of Gertrude which I became aware of only in her later years). Accompanied by Niko (her elegant Siamese companion of many years), she would settle down in front of the telly to watch Jessica Fletcher solve a mystery in 52 minutes (or thereabouts). Come to think of it, she had a fair bit in common with Misses Lansbury and Fletcher . . . being a lively, literate, intelligent, handsome, articulate, and accomplished woman of a certain age. Moreover, she knew—intimately—literature, her own mind, and how to enjoy life.



*Dignity,  
playfulness and  
passion*

Dignity, playfulness, and passion are not words that one generally thinks of as belonging together, but in Gertrude they met—and merged. Gertrude was an object lesson in how to play with passion (in every sense of those words). Come to think of it, if I was forced to come up with one word to describe Gertrude, I believe it would be *passionate*. Passionate about Bill—the love of her life (she missed him *so* very keenly after he died)—and her children; passionate about words, poetry, language and literature; and passionate about sharing her passions—which is what made her such a wonderful teacher and educator—and such a wonderful friend, as well. Her passion was truly inspiring, and if I have absorbed even a small portion of her capacity to live passionately, then I count myself as lucky indeed.

When I knew I would be visiting the Detroit area this past August, one of the things I was most looking forward to was



seeing—and talking with—Gertrude again. (I also thought I'd have another crack at worming her pen name out of her.) Sadly, when I did see her, she was in the hospital and by then unable to communicate. Unsure whether she would know who I was or even what I was saying, it occurred to me that surely her passion for poetry would be one of the last things to slip away, so I resolved to visit her again and (as I lacked her magnificent capacity to recite at will) read her some poetry. My first thought was to find some online, print it out, and bring it with me to the hospital. Then, thinking I might not be the only one who had not come prepared with poetry, I hit upon the happy idea of stopping at a bookstore and buying a book of poems to leave behind in her hospital room, which would have the advantage of allowing others to share poetry with her.

I spent my last visit with Gertrude reading poems to her. I wished I could have rendered them even a fraction as well as I remembered her doing, but I did the best I could. Then I said goodbye.