

RANDOLPH-MACON PROSE AND VERSE

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“Miss Mabel” of Randolph-Macon

By BETTY JO HANNA, 1950

PICK a day—any day between the first of April and the middle of May, look for a group of girls rehearsing for one of Randolph-Macon's fabulous Greek plays, in the Dell, and then glance over on the hillside. If you see someone lithely running up and down while others must stop for breath after every few steps, the chances are that this person is Dr. Mabel Kate Whiteside, head of the Department of Greek, busily putting the finishing touches on *The Trojan Women*, *Hecuba*, *Medea*, *The Seven against Thebes*, or Sophocles' *Electra*, her latest in the series of productions which have brought fame to this Southern college for these forty-odd years.

Born the daughter of Samuel R. and Kate (Tune) Whiteside, in Bell Buckle, Tennessee, “Miss Mabel,” as she is affectionately called by everyone, developed an early interest in the Greek language, for it was strongly emphasized at the Webb School for boys, which she attended along with a few other Bell Buckle girls. There she found that hard work was a necessity. So she did work hard. In spite of the rigid discipline at Webb School, with its many picturesque traditions, she had a happy life there for three years. Upon graduation at sixteen, she accepted a position as teacher of Latin, Greek, and German at the Soule College in Murfreesboro, where she remained for two years. Then she entered the University of Chicago from which institution she received the A. B. degree in 1902, the A. M. in 1915, and the Ph. D. in 1932. While there, she studied with such notable scholars as Professors Bonner, William Bishop Owen, and Paul Shorey. Her doctoral dissertation was done under the guidance of the last-named authority on the Classics. When Dr. Shorey visited the Randolph-Macon campus in 1917 and saw the presentation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, he said, “Now I have just seen my Greek granddaughter perform in a Greek drama.” He was referring to the girl who played Antigone, whom he considered to be his Greek granddaughter because she was the pupil of Miss Mabel, who had been his own student.

In the fall of 1902, Miss Whiteside and her brother went to Pickens, Mississippi, where they served as co-principals of the combination grade and high school. Next, after a brief career of teaching in that Southern state, she accepted a position as instructor in all subjects at the Brooks School in Chicago.

"There I had one of my most difficult experiences as a teacher," Miss Mabel recollected. "I was asked to teach my students about cotton raising, birds, and fur-bearing animals. With my experience in the South, I was fairly well equipped to handle the first two, but I knew nothing about fur-bearing animals. Since I had to meet the requirements, I was forced to learn in a hurry; so one day while in downtown Chicago, I walked into a very exclusive fur shop. After I had been there for a long time, walking up and down the aisles, the manager approached and offered to show me some furs. I was very much embarrassed, and told him that I didn't want to buy anything—that I was only looking. He eyed me as though he thought I was going to make off with one of his furs, and so I finally broke down and told him of my predicament, whereupon he became greatly interested, and began a long explanation of the various animals which produced the furs, their habits, and the processes by which these furs were prepared for the market. Much enlightened, I left the shop feeling reassured, with more than enough material to pass on to my students."

From the Brooks School, Miss Whiteside came to Randolph-Macon Woman's College in the fall of 1904, where she has taught every year since with the exception of two years during which she was on a leave of absence to work toward her Ph. D. For the first twenty years of her career at this college, she taught both Greek and Latin; but for the last twenty, she has taught only Greek, which has always been her first love. Since 1934, Greek has been a separate department, and she has been the head of it.

As one watches Miss Mabel in class, one often wonders just what will come from behind those dreamy eyes. Truly, her voice, as she reads the Greek to her girls, shows that it has become quite adapted to the language in tone; and the effect is one that can easily lull a girl to sleep. Then follows the startling and inspirational part of this class, for from behind those half-shut eyes comes a fascinating comparison of ancient and modern religion that arouses everyone, and suddenly there is keen, eager interest exhibited as each girl contributes her ideas to the discussion.

Miss Mabel approaches the teaching of Greek in her own way, emphasizing, even in the first year, philosophy and literature rather than grammar. Enough grammar is put across to her pupils in the freshman course to enable them to read in the actual Greek, but there is little stress

upon translation until the following year when the classes take on a mixture of the ideas of Homer and Miss Mabel. At times the students sit amazed as the conversational topics range from the *Iliad* to the *Æneid* and then on to Miss Mabel's knowledge of cookery. She loves to trace a trend of thought, ask her girls how they arrived at such and such a point in their discussion, and how many of them have "kept their eyes on the squirrel." Indeed, it calls for greater concentration than the majority possess to follow one of these discussions from start to finish.

"It is better to tackle the hard tasks first," says Miss Mabel. "There is nothing so difficult about acquiring a knowledge of Greek grammar, but an appreciation of the literature is hard to attain. Long after a girl has been graduated from college, she may have forgotten what grammar she has learned, but I believe that what she has learned through a reading knowledge of Greek will have stuck with her."

Her students think she is right. They continually pay her one of the highest tributes in their power. At Randolph-Macon there is a rule that all pupils must wait ten minutes after the final class bell has rung before leaving; if by that time the instructor has failed to meet the class, then any student may leave. In Miss Mabel's classes, however, there exists a tradition whereby no girl leaves the classroom unless Miss Mabel has sent word that she will not be there. Frequently she is late to class; just as often her girls wait for her, and sometimes even send for her. Although theirs is the right to do so, they would not think of walking out on Miss Mabel.

Perhaps the most important thing Miss Mabel does for her students is to help them achieve an appreciation of the Greek by giving them an opportunity to be in a Greek play. Whether a girl has a speaking part or dances in one of the choruses, she has the chance to learn coöperation while she learns her part. When a student is working toward the presentation of such a play, she sometimes has the miserable feeling that, because of the seeming lack of organization of the entire thing, she is attempting to accomplish the impossible; for Miss Mabel has a way of making her girls feel entirely responsible for the production. Although there is no visible organization connected with anything she undertakes, as anyone who has witnessed one of her plays comes to know, she really has a power of organization all her own.

Every spring, there is much confusion as the final date for production

approaches. Rarely does Miss Mabel begin formal rehearsals for a play more than a month beforehand, and then there is untold perturbation as though she and everyone else, for that matter, regretted procrastinating; but each year the Greek Department chalks up another success on its list of over thirty-five performances. Perhaps this is just one more example of what unusual effort can produce.

Don't think that the task of learning those difficult lines for a part in one of the aforementioned dramas is left entirely to the girls; that would be to underestimate greatly the lively interest that Miss Mabel takes in every participant. It is well known that she personally coaches those who fall by the wayside, swamped with studies and the hard task of memorizing lines of Greek at the same time. Many times has a student been known to put off her memory work until the last minute, leaving Miss Mabel and those who listen, as the poor girl stumbles through her lines, in a most discouraged frame of mind. But no one has ever let Miss Mabel down. It is an amazing fact that the girl who gives the poorest performance at the dress rehearsal is frequently the one to excel during the play itself. Indeed Miss Whiteside has been known to take a girl who has been turned down by the College dramatic club time and time again because of her poor acting, put her in a Greek play, and prove that she can really act. More important than this, such participation in the play has often revealed the girl to herself.

Miss Mabel can tell many a story connected with her plays. For instance, one year, she decided to use real English sparrows instead of stuffed birds for the opening scene of Aristophanes' comedy *The Birds*. These were provided by the College gardener, and given to the actors to hold before their entrance upon the stage. As might be expected, the birds grew impatient long before their stage appearance. Two of them "took flight" and the third clung stubbornly to its keeper's hand until, with torn nerves, she managed to shake it loose. The conclusion drawn may be that the three girls were forced to modify their stage gestures, being, alas, *sans oiseaux*.

At another time, Miss Whiteside planned to use a mule to draw a cart in *Iphigenia at Aulis*. There were only two hindrances. Both the girl who was to ride in the cart and the one who was to speak to the mule affectionately were deathly afraid of the animal. Then too, the mule turned out to be exceptionally large and mangy looking as well. Somehow

the girls overcame their fear, however; and with careful grooming by cooks and yard men who were terribly ashamed of his appearance, the mule emerged in all his glory on the day of the performance.

The only time Miss Mabel ever exhibits outwardly the slightest emotion is during the actual performance of one of her plays. Sometimes, preceding a play, she walks slowly into the amphitheatre dressed as the priest of Dionysus, accompanied by two attendants who dance around her; then she takes her seat on the hillside, in a niche corresponding to the seat which the Greeks always reserved for the priest, and remains there for the entire play, at the end of which time she walks slowly out, thus closing the drama. But don't think she remains entirely oblivious while seated there in her secluded spot. No sooner does she sit down than she quickly becomes "Miss Mabel," chief prompter for the drama—and what a wonderful place for a prompter, hidden from the audience but very much within hearing distance of the actors. At other times, she sits on the hillside with the large crowd of spectators who come from all over the United States and parts of Canada. Then she is tense, anxious lest someone become confused and forget her lines, and she will leave the audience, find a solitary place away from them, yet near her girls, as they so skillfully perform their rôles. And this woman, wearing antioch shoes and the plainest of dresses, this professor with greying hair and rimless glasses, becomes so absorbed in the lines of the play that she is no longer a part of the crowd.

Through her long years as teacher of Greek at Randolph-Macon, there have been many tributes paid Miss Whiteside, the most noteworthy being the presentation of the stage in the Dell by the Classes of 1938 and 1939, together with other alumnæ and friends. Although equipped with modern dressing-room facilities, it keeps the proportions of an ancient Greek theatre. On the stage is a plaque bearing the following inscription:

DEDICATED TO
MABEL KATE WHITESIDE, PROFESSOR OF GREEK
WHOSE TEACHING
HAS INSPIRED SUCCESSIVE GENERATIONS
OF STUDENTS

PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE BY THE
ALUMNÆ ASSOCIATION MAY 13, 1939, ON THE OCCASION
OF HER TWENTY-FIFTH GREEK PLAY PRODUCTION

GIFT OF
THE CLASSES OF 1938 AND 1939
AND OTHER ADMIRERS AND SHARERS OF HER
UNIQUE CONTRIBUTION TO OUR CULTURAL ENRICHMENT

A zestful participant in all campus activities, she has held and still holds offices in numerous associations, both classical and educational. She is happiest when she is active, and she remains constantly active, eagerly interested in topics both ancient and modern. That is one of the many things which an interest in the Greek has done for her and which she so enthusiastically passes on to her students. During recent student-faculty softball games, spectators have not been surprised to find Miss Mabel leading the cheers!

Though apparently indifferent, she has a genius for friendship, especially with her students. When Miss Whiteside was Counsellor of Women (the office later designated as Dean of Students) at the College, it was considered a distinct privilege to be asked to sit at her table for meals. One of her former students told me that she exercised firm control and maintenance of discipline by no seeming effort at all. It was the girls' deep respect for their Miss Mabel that brought about the excellent conduct of the students.

"We were never loud, but there was always an atmosphere of warmth and congeniality at our table as we would share our troubles with Miss Mabel," explained the former pupil. "She would always let us explode with our latest grudge, and would never say a word until we had finished; then she would advise us in her calm tone of voice. In that way she would approach us in a purely objective manner, and show us where we were right or wrong."

On a recent occasion several alumnæ, with their husbands, visited Lynchburg and invited Miss Mabel to a steak fry. She gayly attended, typically robed in one of her oldest dresses, ready to help with the cooking

—and it is said she is an excellent chef. Especially is she known for her distribution of coffee to the members of her immediate family, her neighbors, and to the workmen on campus as well.

“I think I enjoy doing it, because I like coffee so much myself,” says she.

Miss Whiteside is totally unaware of herself as a campus personality. She has no idea as to the extent of her influence on others; indeed, she would not be “Miss Mabel” if she had. She teaches for the love of teaching, and continues to teach past the retirement age. Perhaps her greatest achievement through her many years at Randolph-Macon has been her ability to help each girl “know herself” as the Greeks believed was so important; and through her interest in other people, she has maintained her most outstanding quality—utter selflessness.

Song for a Girl*

By MARY SUE (BARRON) WATSON, 1950

Do not seek Euphrosyne,
The light, the debonaire, the free.
She is not here. Laugh no more.
Here the bright mask, the veil she wore;
Here her green footstep on the hill—
But she, the changeling child, is still.

*“Song for a Girl” was awarded first place among the poems published in the *Tattler* of 1949-1950.



Photograph by Fred Dudley

DR. WHITESIDE AS THE PRIEST OF DIONYSUS
IN THE *Electra* OF SOPHOCLES