

Lady Mary Florence Elinor Stewart

Doctor of Letters

Durham Cathedral, 3 July 2009

Today we celebrate the achievements of Mary Florence Elinor Stewart Graduate of Durham University and the College of St Hild. This year was the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the College of St Hild. Thus it is fitting that the University marks this anniversary with the award of an honorary degree to one of the College's most illustrious former students and staff members.

Mary Stewart is renowned throughout the world as an authoress of popular novels, which combine romance and mystery. She is widely credited with having invented this sub genre, although when put to her that she done so, she modestly responded "*Can't I say that I just write stories*"?

So where did this gift of story telling come from? Mary's father, the Reverend F.A. Rainbow was an Anglican Minister who served the whole of his ministry in County of Durham. Hardly, the type of family background you might think for a woman whose heroines mostly found love when pitted against hidden dangers in far-flung and exotic locales. But the Rainbow family were born adventurers and romantics. As a young man, her father was an "an adventurer who had sailed around Cape Horn to New Zealand, where he met and married Mary's mother". Mary's father returned to England with his new bride to take up his post in the Parish of St. Thomas Bishopwearmouth, where Mary was born on September 17th in 1916. Mary was born to write and in later life famously said: "You can learn much about the craft of writing, but you either have the story teller's flair or you don't. It's no virtue of mine. It's just there." And there indeed it was and her flair for writing became evident with the publication of a poem "about the dawn" when she was only five years old. Granted the poem was published in her father's own Parish Magazine ... but even that small advantage did not account for the precocious flair for story telling that Mary displayed.

Mary continued to write poems and stories for publication in her School magazine until she matriculated as a student in English at Durham University in 1935. Unsurprisingly, for a talented young woman, she graduated in 1938 with first class honours but her dream of becoming a Professor of English at Oxford were dashed by the outbreak of World War Two. Instead she obtained a teaching certificate at St Hild's College and settled for a job teaching at an elementary school in Middlesborough. However, in 1941 she was offered and accepted the post of Lecturer in English at Durham University where she obtained her MA in 1941.

1945 was not only a momentous year for Great Britain but was life changing for Mary Rainbow. Across the country Victory in Europe was celebrated with dinners, dances and street parties and Durham was no exception. When Mary went with a soldier friend to the University's VE night dance, which was a costume party, she first met her future husband – she says “He was not hard to spot; he was the chap wearing a girl's gym tunic, lilac socks and ribbon in his hair. He looked dreadful...” Clearly a Castle man then! Mary left the party early, since her friend had to return to his barracks. Since they were walking, Mary was accompanied by two of her students who acted as chaperones. As soon as the friend had been deposited, the students persuaded Mary to return to the party where she was introduced to Fred Stewart. Whatever, his attire Fred chimed with the Rainbow romantic chord, they started to date immediately, were engaged within three weeks and married within three months. I presume that obtaining a church license in this short period of time carried the same advantages as publishing in the Parish magazine!

Fred Stewart was himself an academic of renown. A lecturer in Geology at Durham, Fred was head hunted to the Regius Chair in Geology at Edinburgh University and eventually became a Fellow of the Royal Society and was knighted. Mary Stewart embraced her new life and she saw her primary role as a wife to an illustrious man. Nevertheless, she took the opportunity to develop her extra mural interests that were gardening, natural history, Greek and Roman history and writing. In writing her husband became her champion and continuously encouraged her but it was not until 1953 that he finally

persuaded her to submit a manuscript to a publisher. The novel "Madam, Will You Talk" was published in 1954 and became an instant success. From then on Fred read every manuscript before it was published and their marriage and companionship provided a platform for Mary's career as a novelist. Fred was constantly traveling and Mary always accompanied him, using her time to familiarize herself with locations throughout Europe and the Middle East. These locations became the backdrops to some of her most popular novels, placing her characters in settings ranging from Scotland to the Damascus. A feature of her work is that the descriptions of localities and common daily attitudes in which the romance and drama unfolded were so rich and detailed that her stories seemed real and tangible. Mary recalls the consequence of this virtual reality: "I remember someone writing to me about my very first book, Madam, Will You Talk? She told me that she'd taken it up to read in bed. Then at three in the morning, she wrote me a complaint. I'd come to a point in the book where I'd brought my exhausted heroine and her hero together, and they'd had an absolutely smashing meal, which I described in detail. She said, I had to go down to the kitchen and make myself bacon and eggs."

Mary wrote romantic suspense novels for fifty years with an output of a novel every two years. All of them became best sellers and are published in many languages. Her books delighted both her fans and her publishers who were profiting handsomely from franchising the books as edited releases in women's magazines, television rights and film rights. In addition to her third novel "Thunder on the Right" which she claims to "have detested and been ashamed of" the filming of her novel "Moon Spinners" was an equal disappointment. She took a friend to see the film opening, only to find that the producers had wanted to buy the rights to the title but not the plot and the story line was unknown to her.

Between 1970 and 1995 Mary Stewart wrote her most important novels, the Merlin Series. The novels retold the Arthurian legends but with some groundbreaking changes. She broke with the tradition that Arthur was a mediaeval knight and put the story back to its roots in late Romano British

Society. She also re-invented and invigorated the character of Merlin who became the narrator of the Arthurian tale. The series eventually became a quintet of novels but was never meant to be more than a single story about Merlin. It was a complete break from Mary's previous literary outputs. The publishers were not enthusiastic – she states that: “The publishers didn't want me to write *The Crystal Cave* in the first place, because they were doing so well with the earlier books. Publishers never want you to change; if one horse is doing well, they don't want you to change horses”. Her fans weren't that happy either, Mary reflected that: “They were the sort of teenagers who would write and say, I wanted another nice romantic book; and there were others who said, I enjoyed *The Crystal Cave*, but I really wanted the other kind of book. I would say, well, everything that is in my earlier books you will find in *The Crystal Cave*, and even more besides, which is, I think, quite true. The things that matter to me, that is, not the romance, but the style, the descriptions of place, and the good storytelling, they are still there.” All that Mary says is true and since their publication, the tired old chivalrous mythologies of Mallory have been replaced with characters who could be believed in and stories that might have been true. As Mary Stewart says “Story teller is an old and honorable title and I'd like to lay claim to it”. Since Arthur himself is passed down to us from the storytellers of early British society, it is fitting that one of the great British storytellers reached the pinnacle of her writing career by reinventing that hero.

Mary and Fred Stewart continued to live in Scotland, dividing their time between Edinburgh and their House on the shores of Loch Awe, were Mary lives to this day. Fred died in 2001 after a brief illness and this led to the end of Mary Stewart's career as an authoress, as she says she no longer had any will to write. Perhaps one of the great romantic novelists of our age needed the romance of her life-long companion for her continued inspiration?

Mr Chancellor, I present Mary Florence Elinor Stewart to receive the degree of Doctor of Letters, *honoris causa*.