

Maimie Stephenson

31 March 1904 – 18 December 2001

On first meeting, Maimie Stephenson had a way of making you feel like the two of you had known one another for a very long while. My initial encounter must have been shortly after I discovered that the Stephensons occupied the house right behind mine, theirs on Virginia Avenue and mine on Hitt Street in Columbia, Missouri (both long since demolished to make room for a parking lot). I was by then a doctoral student in Political Science, having already completed my master's degree in Journalism, during which I had been exposed to William Stephenson's ideas through two graduate seminars, neither of which had left much understanding in its wake. But now, after having immersed myself in the literature of social science, I was returning to Stephenson's ideas with an urgent desire to grasp something of their meaning. Hence my journey through the back gate to knock on the door and seek clarification of some point now lost to memory.

And there was Maimie. The encounter was brief, but I remember being struck by her diminutive size and gracious receptivity that made me feel truly welcome, and also the somewhat intimidating English accent and refined voice that Americans associate with culture and good breeding. Actually, "intimidating" is not quite right; rather, it was the odd sense one gets when crossing an unfamiliar threshold, as if stepping through a portal and into another land and having the feeling (to paraphrase Dorothy Gale) that you're not in Missouri anymore. And then there were those bright eyes.



My next firm recollection (with several fleeting ones in the interim) was of several years later when, from my new post at Kent State University, I was returning home for Christmas vacation and stopped in Columbia to visit Will and Maimie, accompanied by my Norwegian elkhound. Upon arrival, Olaf promptly threw up on the Stephensons' kitchen floor. I was mortified but

immediately put at ease by Maimie's reassurance that "this floor has been christened on many occasions" and then her joining me on the floor to help mop up the mess. Camaraderie sometimes gets started in the darnedest ways.

Then, a couple of antiwar years later, I again passed through Columbia appropriately outfitted in tie-dyed jeans, long hair, wire-rimmed glasses, and other accoutrements of the counter-culture, and recall Will's taking me to task for undermining important social institutions, or something to that effect. I defended myself by reminding him of his own ludenic theory, recently published, and of the play forms that promote culture, and recall my surprise when Maimie jumped in on my side, making it two against one. And on several other occasions over the years she came to my defense against that gentle tyrant. Once, following a long-distance phone conversation between Will and me over some arcane point, she had him call me back and apologize for having been what she considered too gruff and unappreciative. I am reminded of the new poem, "No Time," by U.S. poet laureate Billy Collins, who passes by the cemetery where his parents are buried and then is bothered all day by images of his father: "... I think of him rising up / to give me that look / of knowing disapproval / while my mother calmly tells him to lie back down."

Mary Brynhilde Richardson Stephenson was born in Heaton, Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the northeast of England to William Richardson and Mary Robson Richardson, who home-schooled Mary along with her brother William



and sister Erda, until she received a four-year scholarship to attend the King Edward VI School of Art at Armstrong College (University of Durham), Newcastle, from which she graduated in 1925 with a bachelor's degree in Fine Arts. Will at the time was also attending Armstrong (Ph.D. Physics, 1926), which was subsequently separated from Durham to become today's University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Despite urgings from mutual friends, the two might never have met had Will not seen that girl crossing the field to fetch milk from a neighboring farm and asked who she was. They were later introduced at a summer picnic, and on Christmas Day 1929, with the Great Depression in the background, they were married in Muggleswick Church (pictured), County Durham, and throughout her long life Maimie was devoted to art, to Will (1902-1989), and to their surviving children: Averil Schreiber (Kingston, IL), Charles (Washington, DC), Mariel (Columbia), and Richard (Rogersville, MO). She also leaves 13 grandchildren and 3 great-grandchildren.

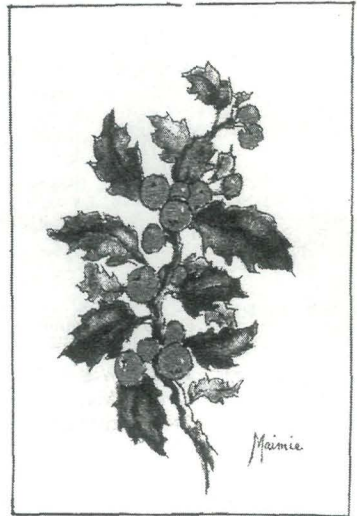
The Stephenson family followed Will's professional fortunes, which included London (1929-1935), Oxford (1935-1948), Chicago (1948-1955), and Greenwich, Connecticut (1956-1958) — with temporary asides in Seattle and Berkeley — before settling in Columbia, Missouri in 1958, the year after I had begun my studies in pre-veterinary medicine; however, the Stephensons could have been on the moon as far as my interests at the time were concerned. Will immediately began impacting communication theory — his "Principles of Selection of News Pictures," the first of his contributions to communication, appeared in 1960 (*Journalism Quarterly*) — and Maimie immersed herself in her own art and in the fledgling Columbia Art League.



Although an amateur painter, Maimie's art was well known in Missouri, and in her final year (February 2001) she received the Hearts of Arts award from the Missouri Heart Center of Columbia. Prior to that (1998), she was the subject of the Columbia Art League's Lifetime Retrospective Exhibit at which about 50 of her paintings were shown. In 1983, she received the Missouri Arts Council Award from the Missouri House and Senate. She once singled out Picasso as her favorite artist, but also acknowledged inspiration from the poetry of Dylan Thomas. She was a volunteer art teacher in the local schools as well as a state prison. Maimie's early instruction came on the knee of her artist mother, and her daughter Mariel carries on the family's artistic tradition.

Will and Maimie's devotion to one another received its severest test in 1980 when she was stricken with Guillain-Barré syndrome, a disorder of the nervous system which left her paralyzed for almost a year. During that period, Will arrived at the hospital at 7 a.m. daily to keep her company and to help her exercise, leaving briefly to cook, clean house, and do a bit of writing, only to return and remain until late at night, giving "an enormous period of his life to looking after me," as she later said in an interview (*Columbia Tribune*, March 17, 1994). Only gradually was she able to regain her painting skills, but the disease left her unable to hold the larger brushes required for oil painting, so much of her later work used water colors, which require smaller brushes. Many of her paintings show a fascination with dying, not in a morbid sense, but because dying things take such beautiful shapes. As she said in the same interview, the autumn leaves "make patterns that they don't make when they're young and sprightly. Humans can't do it like that at all. They aren't clever enough to shrivel interestingly."

Maimie loved to attend the Q conferences in Columbia and to entertain conferees at the Stephenson home, even after Will had died. It was fortunate timing that she lived long enough to learn that the 2002 Q conference was to be held at the University of Durham in what would have been Will's centennial year, and that James Good of Durham's Department of Psychology was spending a year's research leave gathering materials in the U.S. and U.K. for a book-length intellectual biography of Stephenson's life. In his *Dream Cantos* (2001), son Charles wrote of his mother that there was "magic in her voice and her quiet logic." None among those present could ever forget the way she worked her magic when Will interrupted the banquet speaker at the second Q conference (1986), criticizing him for promoting counseling for everything under the sun and noting in the process that, compared to the U.S., Britain didn't have a fraction of the psychologists. As the audience held its collective breath, not knowing which way this was going to go, a magic voice rose above the din with the clarity of an oboe: "But Will, dear, England is such a small country." Laughter and applause followed, as much in gratitude as in admiration, rinsing away the tension and returning a civil equilibrium to the proceedings.



Although without knowledge of the technicalities involved in Q methodology, Maimie was a proud and unwavering supporter of her husband's accomplishments and aspirations, and those of us who have pursued and benefited from those accomplishments can only wonder where we might now be and what we might be doing had there been no Maimie to encourage Will through the despondencies and frustrations that are the constant companions of ignored and misunderstood brilliance. Her friend, William Steiner, in his memorial poem "Maimie," concluded with these lines:

And in those fading years, when all that was left
were the children, the paintings, the friends;
still she would strain from the table, tea
forgotten, to

See if he was still there, amongst the trees, his being fading
into light, that same light that would infuse her,
finally, when she sought to reach out at
last, and join him.

Maimie's and Will's ashes were mingled and scattered in the moors near Muggleswick in September 2002. She was such a sterling example of the cleverness required to shrivel interestingly ... all but those bright eyes.

Steven R. Brown
Ravenna, Ohio

Acknowledgements: Photo of Maimie Stephenson from Mariel Stephenson's collection, of Muggleswick Church by Steven Brown. The painting of the dying leaves is from Charles Stephenson's *Dream Cantos* (Washington, DC: Torquilstone Press, 2001). The signed watercolor of holly is from the cover of Maimie Stephenson's death announcement, which also carried the note, attributed to Native Americans, that "leaving a gap in the outline allows the Spirit it contains to leave in peace."