

MAY WILLIAMS WARD: "THE CHAMPION POET OF KANSAS"

by

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"No two alike" was the theme by which nationally recognized poet, May Williams Ward, lived her entire life. As a young child living in Holden, Missouri, in the 1880s, she was shown by her father that each leaf on a vine is different, each fence picket varies in the thickness of wood and paint, and each person's features make them individuals.¹ Ward's understanding of this basic concept matured along with the child, taking on added meaning with each new experience. She always looked for something special in each person or situation encountered and at the same time recognizing that she, herself, was special. "No two alike" allowed her the freedom and gave her the confidence she needed to develop as a unique individual and a successful writer.

During her writing career which began in 1921 and ended with her death in 1975, May Williams Ward produced seven books (five being collections of her poetry), numerous plays, short stories, and radio programs. For five years she edited The Harp, a national poetry magazine published in Larned, Kansas. Her contemporaries and friends included not only Kansas writers such as William Allen White and Nelson Antrim Crawford, but such notables as Stephen Vincent Benét, Sara Teasdale, and Harriet Monroe (former editor of Poetry, A Magazine of Verse).

May Williams Ward gained national recognition as a poet within the first five years of her literary career, but instead of moving to the East where established literary circles might have offered her greater career opportunities, she chose to remain living in Kansas with her husband who owned and managed grain elevators. She viewed Kansas not as a geographical hindrance to her career but as a vast source of realistic subject matter:

A wide, tall sky the more impressive for the flatness of the plain, great free winds sometimes rising to tornado crescendo, a subtle color scheme of green and tawny gold with sage-grey, and a people salty, racy, and individual . . . the Kansas prairie provides these varied stimuli for her poets.

Then if any Kansan writes verse that is limited in outlook it is not the fault of our sky; if pottiness shows, it is not the fault of our winds. Blatant color could not truly reflect the aspect of the plain, nor conventional characterization indicate the flavor of her people.²

Ward's expertise in expressing her appreciation of Kansas in poetry prompted William Allen White to refer to her as "the champion poet of Kansas."³

Although she was born in Holden, Missouri, in 1882, May Williams Ward always considered Kansas her home. The Williams family moved to Osawatomie when she was seven years old and it was there in "John Brown's town" that she and her five brothers and sisters grew to adulthood.⁴ During this period in her life, Ward was deeply influenced by her grandfather, Reuben Smith, a pioneer settler in Osawatomie. Smith had sailed from his native England to America in 1854, and traveled west to become civilized along with the young territory. Casting his lot with the free state party, he participated in the Kansas-Missouri border warfare, and also helped to organize the Republican party in Kansas. Later, when he served in the state legislature, Smith gained a reputation for his outspoken editorial comments in the local newspapers. May admired her grandfather's mastery of the English language and also his defense of her desire to read everything, regardless of what was deemed appropriate for a young girl to read: "He wouldn't let Grandmother take even Rabelais away from me."⁵

Always a voracious reader, Ward took advantage of her grandfather's personal library and read almost every one of his books. In this way, she was introduced to Scott, Trollope, Swift, Milton, Thackeray, Pope, Shakespeare, Poe, and others. However, she later admitted to borrowing his uncensored Arabian Nights Tales most often, and second in frequency, his Charles Dickens volumes.⁶ Her thirst for reading material eventually led to the establishment of a house rule concerning kitchen chores. In those days, it was a common practice to fasten newspaper pages to the wall behind the kitchen stove to catch splatter from fat used in cooking. Because May would become so engrossed in reading the papers while cooking, her mother made it a rule that the papers were to be hung upside down so that May would not be distracted and burn the food.⁷

May Williams Ward entered the School of Arts at Kansas State University (now the University of Kansas) in the fall of 1899.⁸ Somehow, George Williams had managed to scrape together enough money to send his eldest child on her way to Lawrence, where she lived with a friend of the family, Mrs. T. S. Roberts. The student described the Roberts home as being "full of books and magazines and smart children. The table talk was always fast give-and-take and I lost some of my early shyness there."⁹

Aside from social functions, May branched out academically and culturally. Her appetite for reading was nourished by the University's Spooner Library and the guidance of helpful professors. During her junior and senior years, May often received invitations to the home of University professor and famous author, William

Herbert Carruth, from his daughter, Constance. The Carruths frequently entertained visiting dignitaries; thus, Ward gained exposure to intellectually stimulating conversations between Carruth and other authors.¹⁰ Although she was not enrolled in the School of Fine Arts, Professor William Griffith allowed her and several other interested students to explore the basic techniques of art under his supervision on Saturdays.¹¹ This was the only formal training in art she ever received, and it provided her with the basic knowledge she needed to design the block prints which accompanied many of her published poems in later years.

In June 1905, she graduated Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in mathematics, perhaps an unlikely major considering her love for literature. When one of her cousins questioned this course of study, Ward explained that literature was much like art in that she considered them both to be luxury courses: "I could work these . . . things out myself or among my friends I could get a little help from the ones who had gained expertise in a particular area." However, she claimed that there were principles in mathematics which required more concentrated direction and discipline in order for her to understand them. Furthermore, she detected common ground in both literature and mathematics. Ward compared the writing of a sonnet to the steps involved in the proof of a mathematical theorem: both were rigid in their formats.¹²

After spending the next two and one-half years teaching high school in Osawatimie and Arkansas City, May married Merle Ward whom she had met during her last two years at the University. On January 13, 1908, the newly weds arrived in Lamar, Colorado, where Merle worked for the Colorado Mill and Elevator Company.¹³ As Merle advanced in the company, the Wards moved from Lamar to Spearville, Kansas, to Pueblo, Colorado, and back to Lamar.¹⁴

Ward's writing career began rather unassumingly in 1920 when she was awarded second prize in a poetry contest sponsored by the Colorado Federation of Women's Clubs. Encouraged by writers she had met through the contest, the fledgling poet submitted her contest winner along with two other poems to Life magazine, failing to consider that Life at this time was a humor magazine and her poems were not humorous. However, Life occasionally printed a serious verse and May's quatrain, "Youth Wants Summer," impressed the editors to the extent that it was printed on the first page of the February 17, 1921, issue with an illustration to accompany it.¹⁵

Youth wants summer, and a sweetheart, and the moon,
 And flowers, and a fine new gown, forsooth,
 And music and excitement and to win tomorrow's game . . .
 Age wants----youth.¹⁶

Of course, to sell the first piece of writing submitted to an

editor was an exceptional stroke of luck. Ward, however, was not yet aware of this:

I thought, "Oh, this was easy. I'm going to be a writer. I'm launched! I made Life!" And so I wrote a lot more poems and, you know, I didn't sell another one for six or eight months, and I had to write some of these friends who encouraged me and say, "What's wrong? What's happened?" And they were astonished at this accidental early success and told me a little bit about choosing your magazines . . . and reading a magazine, maybe, to which you want to sell so that you would have some idea whether it fitted or not.¹⁷

Before Ward received the news that her poem, "Youth Wants Summer," had been accepted for publication in Life magazine, she and Merle moved to Montezuma, Kansas. Merle left the Colorado Mill and Elevator Company in 1920 to form an independent grain business with his brother, Vernon. The two worked as partners in buying and selling grain elevators in western Kansas towns for the next twelve years. The first of these towns was Montezuma.¹⁸

The only house May and Merle could find to rent in the tiny prairie town was very small with absolutely no modern conveniences. Ward recalled later that she had not been "roughing it in this fashion" since childhood:

AND [sic] in the backyard John I opened the letter that gave me a big thrill. Each morning I would walk downtown with my husband and get the mail. (This time had to hurry back.) The check, for \$5.00 [from Life magazine] looked mighty big to me that fall day, on a 3-holer in Montezuma, Kansas.¹⁹

The Ward Brothers Grain Company sold the Montezuma elevator just a few months after buying it, so May and Merle were not forced to be pioneers in their unmodern home for very long. Their next residence was in Belpre, Kansas where they remained for the next twelve years.²⁰

In 1921, May's poetry saw print in such magazines as Life, Ladies Home Journal, Judge, Country Gentleman, and American Magazine, and in the New York Sun and the Kansas City Star newspapers.²¹ One of her poems, "Substitutes," placed third and another, "Song Cycle--Farmer and Wheat," placed fourth in the 1921 Kansas Authors Club poetry competition.²² As a new member of the Kansas Authors Club, she gained entry into a circle of mutually supportive literateurs in the midwest region. She acquired a number of corre-

spondents with whom she exchanged poetry, criticism, and encouragement. At first, a frequent correspondent was Nelson Antrim Crawford, President of the Kansas Authors Club during 1922-1923. Crawford sent May books from the library at the Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan where he was a professor of journalism. Of particular significance was his advice to read On English Poetry by Robert Graves, which May frequently referred to for technical guidelines as her attention to verse forms increased.²³

Another noteworthy correspondent was William Allen White who readily offered his assistance to a fellow Kansan embarking upon a writing career.²⁴ After reading several verses Ward had sent to him, White replied:

I believe you have it. Anyway, the fact that you can sell to *Life*, *The Ladies Home Journal*, *The Kansas City Star* and *Judge* indicates that smarter men than I know that you have it. Good luck to you, and go ahead.²⁵

And ahead she went. At the age of forty, Ward plunged into the competitive literary world, producing poems and short stories at a staggering rate and receiving an enviable number of acceptances from magazine and newspaper publishers. Apparently, she was not a temperamental artist and had no qualms about changing her poems to have them accepted for publication as evidenced in a letter she wrote to the editors of Good Housekeeping magazine in July, 1922:

I do thank you for the hint of interest in these verses and for the chance to recast them. If the revision is not radical enough, please give me more definite suggestions, and let me try again.²⁶

Recognition of her talent followed rapidly, and she was asked by Nelson Antrim Crawford to lead the Poetry Department of the Kansas Authors Club in 1923, only to be promoted the following year to Seventh District Vice-President. Always an innovator, Ward's terms of office were marked by new approaches in carrying out her duties. As Poetry Department Leader, she presented an exhibit of manuscript and published poems of nearly two hundred Kansas writers as her departmental report at the annual meeting. This was something new and, according to the *Kansas Authors Bulletin*, "It set a pace for other departments to follow." She also strayed from the usual miscellaneous program at the Poetry Round Table which was under her direction at the 1925 annual meeting. Instead of discussing numerous poets and topics, the whole period was devoted to the study of one poet who was attaining wide-spread influence in that day, Emily Dickinson.²⁷

In 1924, Raymond Morley, a cousin of May's living in California, recognized the singing quality of her verses and composed music for her poem, "Tremolo." It was not long before other musicians and composers followed Morley in setting to music the poems of May Williams Ward. Among them were F. J. Habercorn of Hutchinson, Rebecca Welty Dunn of Arkansas City, and Mary Carruth Barton, a niece of William Herbert Carruth. Even Cecil Arden of the Metropolitan Opera Company selected several songs with lyrics by May Williams Ward for her repertoire.²⁸

But, above all, Ward seemed to enjoy the responses she received from readers. The first real flood of letters she received was in response to her poem, "Ironing," which appeared in the November, 1922, issue of Good Housekeeping. The poem captured in verse what so many mothers felt, so they immediately sent letters to her sympathizing with an author they believed was being taken for granted by her husband and children. May was amazed at this response since she had no children of her own and had only imagined what the character in her poem must have felt.²⁹

I have ironed my husband's shirts, oh, very smoothly;
I wish I could as easily erase
His frowning, worried look of inattention--
I can not read the new lines in his face.

Mary lets me iron her crepes and laces;
I wonder if she thinks that Mother's hands
Would tear the fine-meshed fabric of her love-dream?
I wish she knew that Mother understands.

Jack likes the finest moinsock, trim, athletic,
Next to his skin. Most finical of men,
How can he bear to waste his time on Gladys?
I wish he were a little boy again.

Oh, well! My task today is just the ironing;
But while I iron, I can not help but pray--
Dear Lord, please let me smooth my loved ones' pathways;
Please do not let them drift too far away!³⁰

However, her readers were not limited to housewives; she received fan letters from women and men living in a wide assortment of geographical areas and working in all types of occupations, including a railroad vice president in North Dakota.³¹ Ward's mathematical background is apparent when one reads her explanation of the importance she attached to response:

Out of my individual mix of all things read and experienced and felt sometimes a lyric emerges that meets response. If poetry is shared emotion,

I have been fortunate enough to share. Fan letters--the term sounds cheap but the experience of getting them is not--fan letters complete a circle. The emotion felt; the coloring of it in the subconscious mind; the struggling to express a fraction of its vividness; so much of an arc I make myself. Then the editor, the printer, and the reader take over and extend the curve. But unless some reader writes to me, or some hearer says I have felt that too, there is a tiny gap. Response completes the circle.

Sometimes the response is not agreement but a violent disagreement. The circle is completed just the same. Sometimes a reader discerns something more than was originally intended. That not only completes the one circle but perhaps starts another intersecting one. In any case poetry is utterance, and to talk to nothingness and nobody would be thwarting. I am grateful that a large share of my utterances see print, and bring letters and often new friends.³²

The year 1925 was a momentous one for the novice writer. Several opportunities presented themselves which served to push May Williams Ward over the boundary line from the novice category into national prominence as a writer. First, Harriet Monroe, editor of the highly-respected Poetry, A Magazine of Verse in Chicago, published May's poem, "My Little Sister," in the February, 1925, issue. To have a poem accepted by Monroe was tantamount to receiving a literary stamp of approval judging from the correspondence exchanged between Ward and her contemporaries. An increased note of respect can be detected in letters she received from other writers after this breakthrough.

My little sister had everything.
Everything in the world--
Blue eyes, dimples, pink cheeks,
And her hair curled.

She played forward at basketball
And shot ducks from cover.
She had a sweet rose-colored hat
And a tall lover.

All her life she had everything;
Plenty and more than plenty.
She did not need a perfect death--
Death at twenty.³³

The second major boost in Ward's literary career came in

the form of an invitation to spend a month at the MacDowell Colony in Peterborough, New Hampshire. For a nominal fee, the Colony offered freedom from interruption, rest, and the finest of company in a beautiful mountains and pine-trees setting. Ward was one of only thirty people representing the seven arts to be selected out of more than three hundred possibilities in that year, and she was only the fourth Kansan ever to be so honored.³⁴

Perhaps it was another bit of luck, like her first poem published in *Life*, that led to receiving an invitation to the MacDowell Colony. The Wards had attended a MacDowell concert in Wichita on their way to visit Merle's parents in Wellington earlier that year. Mrs. Marian MacDowell, widow of the famous composer, Edward MacDowell, and founder of the Colony, was in attendance that evening also. She invited May to the Colony but explained that there were some formalities which would need to be taken care of: 1) being sponsored by two eminent writers, and 2) being accepted by the Colony's membership committee. May's friend in nearby Kinsley, Kansas, Mrs. Cora G. Lewis (a well-traveled newspaper-woman and respected patron of the creative arts), obtained William Allen White and Willard Wattles as sponsors for May, and also saw to it that additional letters were sent to the membership committee from editors who had published Ward's writings. She confided in a letter to her family that the timing for the trip east was bad for them financially, but it was such an honor and an opportunity that she and Merle agreed she should go.³⁵

Among other colonists during the summer of 1925 were Edwin Arlington Robinson (who by this time twice had been awarded the Pulitzer Prize for literature), Sara Teasdale, Stephen Vincent Benet, and Dubose and Dorothy Heyward (of *Porgy and Bess* fame).³⁶ While at the Colony, May wrote to her family that "Notables are thick as blackberries."³⁷ Anna Heyward Taylor, a painter, became one of Ward's favorite people during her stay. It is possible that May's block prints, which she designed several years later to symbolize the rhythm of some of her poems, were an idea born out of her observation of the wood block prints that Taylor was making at the Colony.³⁸

Ward described her three weeks in Peterborough as follows:

The total impression was overwhelming, and stimulating naturally. From the sheaf of poems I wrote there, in charming Mansfield studio, I gained entrance to such magazines as *Poetry*, *Commonweal*, *Forum*, and the like
 . . . Beautiful scenery, good talk, and long leisure hours to write made a memorable interlude. But I knew that it was only an interlude, with the happiness of going home just around the corner.³⁹

Her stay at the Colony lasted only three weeks in June because Ward wanted to spend the last week of the month visiting her father in New York.⁴⁰ (Widowed George Williams had remarried again, after a brief second marriage had ended in divorce, and moved back to his birthplace, Naples, New York.)⁴¹ Another reason for cutting short her trip east was her concern about being gone during Merle's busy season at the grain elevator.⁴² The separation was difficult for both May and Merle, busy season or not, as illustrated in a letter Merle wrote to May while she was gone:

Darling Hope it doesn't make you blue for me to tell how lonely I am & [*sic*] how much I want you for I do oh I do but I am going to be game for you to go on & have your experience there & am for you all the way. I feel better since you told me it wasn't worth our being separated and have put out my chest about four inches for as I told you yesterday I, down in my heart, when you left was afraid--awfully afraid, you put the trip first. I know now you didn't & it makes me happy.⁴³

And it is obvious that her thoughts were back in Kansas when she composed this poem in her MacDowell studio:

Prairie land is golden,
 Airy, wide.
 The sky our only mountain,
 We, inside.
 Who would choose a small land
 Where the hills,
 Steadily asserting
 Granite wills,
 Narrow all horizons,
 Stand apart?
 Ah, my golden prairie,
 In the sky-mountain's heart!⁴⁴

May Williams Ward returned to Kansas in July "with a new respect for the quality of literary work being done by westerners."⁴⁵ Apparently others joined her in this new respect for writing produced west of the Mississippi, and May Williams Ward was undoubtedly a major reason for this higher regard. In 1925 alone, her poetry was sought for four distinguished anthologies both in the United States and abroad. Two requests came while she was still at the MacDowell Colony. One evening she happened to be sitting next to a newcomer at the Colony, Robert Haven Schauffler who was compiling an anthology at the time entitled The Poetry Cure. He wanted to include May Williams Ward among the contributors and chose her poem, "My House," for the anthology which was pub-

lished two years later.⁴⁶ Also, L. A. G. Strong wrote to her from Oxford, England, asking permission to use her poem, "Gifts," in a British anthology.⁴⁷ This international recognition startled Ward, who was not even familiar with Mr. Strong. She asked her fellow MacDowell colonist, Stephen Vincent Benét, for advice:

Mr. Benét said [L. A. G. Strong] was a fine poet and his anthology was one of the best. I must confess my ignorance--I miss a lot of things in my Western isolation.⁴⁸

After returning to Belpre, a letter arrived from William Stanley Braithwaite, who joined Harriet Monroe in admiration of the poem, "My Little Sister," which he had seen in the February issue of Poetry magazine. He asked for permission to include this poem and another, "Gifts," in his Anthology of Magazine Verse for 1925 and Yearbook of American Poetry.⁴⁹ In addition, Ward's poem, "A Legend," appeared in Franklyn Pierre Davis's Anthology of Newspaper Verse for 1925.⁵⁰

One year after her stay at the MacDowell Colony, May climbed another rung on the literary ladder to become editor of The Harp, a national poetry magazine. Leslie and Sara Wallace, newspaper publishers in Larned, Kansas, took over publication of The Harp in 1926 after it had been abandoned by Dr. Israel Newman, first publisher of the literary magazine in 1925. The Wallaces reorganized the entire project and asked May to be the editor. It was a labor of love since May received no salary and the Wallaces published the magazine at cost in their print shop. William Allen White, Arthur Capper, Jouett Shouse, and other notables comprised a list of patrons who contributed to a fund out of which token payments were made to contributing poets. Birger Sandzen, an internationally famous artist who lived in Lindsborg, Kansas, designed the cover for the magazine as suggested by Nell Lewis Woods, a poet of Kinsley. It was a cottonwood tree in the form of a harp.⁵¹

Ward continued editing The Harp for five years, even taking over as publisher for a year in 1930.⁵² But she fell prey to a serious flu epidemic in 1931 which incapacitated her for six months and forced her to retire from her editorial duties. Leslie Wallace and his daughter, Eunice Wallace, struggled with the magazine for another year, but the economic depression finally finished what William Allen White had referred to as "the loveliest adventure in Kansas."⁵³

Just five years after her professional literary debut, Ward's credits included over three hundred poems published in thirty-five magazines, representation in four distinguished anthologies, and numerous favorable reviews by noted critics.⁵⁴ This successful record did not go unnoticed by her peers. As one fellow writer observed:

Do you know, my dear MWW, that you are so much more intellectually active than the rest of us? . . . You take a thought, an idea, and work it out, clothe it in words and rythmn [sic] and make it visible to duller minds. While the rest of us just sit around "waiting for the spark from Heaven to fall" . . . [sic] It falls on some more frequently than on others, but one can make fire by rubbing sticks together 55

This poet refused to sit around and wait for sparks to fall from above because she never believed in the concept of inspiration. Perhaps this view can be linked to her mathematical mind which is apparent in her definitely patterned poems.

I am practical and realist enough to feel that inspiration as we use it sometimes--there actually is no such thing-- it's a reorganization of things you have felt or dreamed or wished you were, all that great mass of stuff that's in the background of everyone's mind. 56

In 1929, May's first book was published by the Bozart Press in Georgia at the suggestion of Ernest Hartsock, editor of Bozart magazine. 57 It was entitled Seesaw, and the title page of the book includes the poem, "Seesaw," as an introduction to the contrasting themes of the poems which follow.

A child learns up . . down . . .
 In a seesaw swing;
 Laugh . . . cry; Love . . . death;
 Poets sing;
 God Himself breathes rhythmically
 Fall . . . Spring; Fall . . . Spring,

See now in the up . . . down
 Of a seesaw swing;
 Key, pattern, symbol. All
 Of everything.
 Everything. 58

The first edition of Seesaw was sold out even before it was printed, and reviews of the book were quite favorable. 59 Both publisher and poet made money, and Merle suggested that May spend her profits on something permanent. She took his advice and purchased sterling silverware and Spode china. Soon, Seesaw went into a second edition and was ready for a third when young Hartsock died unexpectedly, canceling those plans. 60

In the meantime, however, Ward had been busy compiling

another book, In Double Rhythm, which was produced entirely by hand and given as gifts to family members and close friends. Birger Sandzen called his copy of the book "a joy from beginning to end," and in turn, presented May with one of his large oil paintings.⁶¹ But, as soon as copies of In Double Rhythm appeared (in 1929), the writer began receiving requests from libraries and individuals. She honored these requests as time permitted, each copy selling for \$25 to \$50 depending upon the number of poems included in the volume.⁶²

Voice chanted,
Hand heard
Made line and line
For word and word.

Twin expression
One thought
Voice chanted
Hand wrought.

Lines flow,
Words sing
In double rhythm
As wing and wing.⁶³

Each poem included in the book had an accompanying block print on the opposite page. The poet explained the origin of this unique idea as follows:

At the MacDowell Colony I caught myself making doodles instead of writing words while intent upon a poem in its early stages. They had a definite relation to its mood, and in fact were made in time to the beat of its meter. The resultant line rhythms were interesting and occasionally almost beautiful, and easily interpreted by the poem that caused them to be made . . . hence the double rhythm, that of sound of words and sweep of line. . . .

When I translated these pencilled jottings into designs for block prints, I kept the basic lines, the authentic rhythms out of the subconscious, no matter how bizarre their arrangement.⁶⁴

Production of In Double Rhythm was a joint effort between May and Merle. She cut linoleum blocks for about thirty poems and block prints and he manned the printing press which was an old-fashioned clothes wringer. Then, each poem and design was mounted on a page in the book.⁶⁵

In 1932, the Ward Brothers Grain Company sold its western Kansas grain interests "before the prewar depression depressed too much."⁶⁶ Merle and May took a year-long vacation before moving to Wellington, Kansas, to take over the Ward Hotel in 1933. During this year, they traveled to the World's Fair in Chicago where May's book, Seesaw, was included in the Century of Progress Exhibition in the Social Science Building.⁶⁷ While in Chicago, the Wards visited Harriet Monroe, editor of Poetry, A Magazine of Verse:

Merle invited her to lunch with us. She tactfully divided her talk telling Merle about the Insull scandals then making headlines, and bringing me up to date on notable poets, contributors to her magazine. . . . She gave us a handsome handwritten copy of her poem "Follow the Trail," and asked for my autograph in the books of my own which she had received to review.⁶⁸

When Merle's widowed mother died in 1933, she left the Ward Hotel to her three sons. This began a new chapter in May's life as a hotel manager, and a few years later, hotel owner, when Merle bought out his brothers' interests in the property.⁶⁹

May's literary record during the next twenty years shows that neither her advancing age nor the responsibilities of managing a hotel could slow her pace. Within this time period, she received two first place awards from the Poetry Society of America, once in April, 1937, for a series of poems entitled "Dust Bowl" (later published in the New York Times) and again in November, 1946, for her poem, "In That Day" (later published in Kansas Magazine).⁷⁰ In addition to her membership in the Kansas Authors Club (of which she served as president, 1940-1941), Ward had been a member of the Poetry Society of America since 1928, having been proposed for membership by Mrs. Edwin Markham;⁷¹ she helped organize the Poetry Society of Kansas and served as its president from 1932 to 1934;⁷² from the beginning of its fourth series in 1933, Kansas Magazine received her assistance as contributor, poetry editor, consulting editor, and contributing editor;⁷³ in 1937, she was asked to write a monthly column about Kansas writers in the Sunday Topeka Capital newspaper;⁷⁴ in 1946, she became a charter member of the Radio Council of Kansas Women, serving as script writer and chairperson of the literature section for a series of radio programs about women of Kansas which were broadcast over the University of Kansas radio station, KFKU;⁷⁵ for six years she coached groups of writers in Wichita, first at the Twentieth Century Club and then a private group which originally had gathered under the leadership of Rea Woodman;⁷⁶ and also, she was book review editor for the Wellington Daily News.⁷⁷

In addition to the activities mentioned above, along with

numerous speaking engagements, May Williams Ward managed to produce three more books during this time. In 1938, a collection of her poetry entitled From Christmas-Time to April won the nationwide Kaleidograph Eighth Book Publication Contest. The theme of the book was "nations sing Peace on Earth at Christmas, and start a war in April."⁷⁸ The book received rave reviews during the months following its publication, as evidenced by the following article which appeared in the Emporia Gazette:

Mrs. Ward is easily the best known Kansas poet who now lives within our borders. She should be our laureate. Her volume of verse has been most successful. It was published by the Kaleidograph Press at Dallas and received beautiful notices. The title, "From Christmas-Time to April," indicates the scope of the volume. . . .

. . . Mrs. Ward is well known among the Kansas authors and her fame has reached across the west. Kansas has every reason to be proud of her.⁷⁹

However, war scarcities facing the nation during that time stopped the possibility of a second edition of the book.⁸⁰

May's next book was co-authored with an elementary school teacher from Wellington, Dorothy Harvel. The two women were experimenting with choral readings for children when they discovered a lack of suitable material. So they combined their knowledge and talents in a textbook entitled Approach to Social Studies Through Choral Speaking, published in 1945 by a small firm in Boston which specialized in speech textbooks.⁸¹ The book contains over one hundred verses for children under twelve, with hints on health, safety, courtesy, and other social studies. According to Ward:

We tried for brevity, a light touch, and strong rhythm . . . [sic] an approach that would seem fun for the children, and at the same time teach them good pronunciation and all that. Then we tried the verses out on the dog.⁸²

After a brief time out from writing in order to have her appendix removed at the age of seventy, Ward resumed her rapid pace and produced another book in 1954.⁸³ It was appropriately entitled Wheatlands since it was a collection of her poems about Kansas prairies and Kansas people. She published the book privately and included her award-winning poems about the dust bowl.

I. Reversal

Dust again. All our values are shaken
When earth and air reverse their functions,

When earth flies upward and air presses downward,
 when earth is taken
 And swirled in the sky, earth that should be massive
 and hard
 Beneath our feet; and when air
 Symbol of lightness, is choke and curse and heaviness
 Pushing despair
 Under the sill and into the hard-pressed lung--
 Bright air flung
 Down in the dust.
 We could not bear it except we must
 For all our values are shaken. What is earth?
 Is there anything solid and sure? And what is air?
 Is there sun anywhere?

II. Long After Spring

The spring seems no spring when the pall
 Of dust is over all
 A winterish death to the green of the land,
 When the hand
 Opens and gathers nothing;
 After no harvest in fall after such a spring, if the rain
 Comes, however late, unfruitful, out of season,
 illogical hope springs again
 Now too late, too long after spring. The mind
 cannot cope
 With the strangeness of this untimely swing
 Upward, but even with hopeless hope
 The heart can cope.
 Itself is a strange thing.

III. Rain

We had known we should not really starve
 Though the cows and the grass had died,
 But we moved like sleepwalkers half alive
 Our hearts were dry inside.
 Today when it rained we ran out doors
 And stood and cried.⁸⁴

In the later 1950s, Ward began compiling a book manuscript which she intended to call Near-Pioneer. She accumulated pioneer stories and reminiscences from the Williams family and the Ward family, and also asked friends to contribute accounts related to them by their parents and grandparents who were pioneers in Kansas. Soon, she realized she had enough material for two books, so she concentrated first on a more personal book intended as gifts to her relatives.⁸⁵ This autobiographical book, No Two Years Alike, was published by Triangle Publishing Company in

in Dallas in 1960. Since the timing of the book's appearance coincided with the Kansas centennial celebration, No Two Years Alike received a significant amount of publicity, perhaps more than it deserved, and a second edition went into print in 1961. Ward continued to gather information for Near-Pioneer, but the manuscript was never published.

Family remained important to May Williams Ward throughout her life. She agreed with the advice of William Allen White which he offered to her at the beginning of her career:

He asked me on my first meeting with him if I were happily married. I said yes indeed and then he told me that for any person, woman or man, to put any kind of career above married happiness was a serious and vital mistake.⁸⁶

Always, her marriage came first, but luckily, the writer never had to make a choice between her marriage and her career. Merle supported her career wholeheartedly, his pride in her accomplishments leaving no room for jealousy or envy. Perhaps this explains why she never played an active role in the women's movement. She always enjoyed the personal freedom to do the things she desired to do, and never felt pressured or limited being Mrs. Ward. When asked by a relative if Merle resented her busy traveling schedule, May replied confidently: "No, he doesn't mind my going if he feels it makes me happy and I'll come back to him."⁸⁷

Although the Wards' finances grew increasingly limited after their move to Wellington in 1933, this did not injure their social standing in the local community or elsewhere. Their company was frequently sought in all social circles.⁸⁸ Ward continued writing and traveling, though she was forced now to rely on buses, taxis, or friends for transportation. Gay-colored scarves and bright flowers dressed up last year's clothes when the budget no longer permitted shopping sprees in Kansas City.⁸⁹ But despite their lack of money, the Wards continued to enjoy life. They possessed that rare ability to rise above material circumstances which would understandably drown many people in self-pity.⁹⁰

The arc of the moon in waning
Is smooth as her upward swing.
Autumn and quiet winter
Flow gently down from spring.
Roses are calm through cycles
Of petal and petal dust
But men grow old resentfully
And only because they must.⁹¹

May Williams Ward continued writing as long as she was

still able to hold a pen in her hand. Her last book, In That Day, was published in 1969 by the University Press of Kansas when May was eighty-seven years old. A long-time friend and fellow writer, Bruce Cutler, carefully edited the book which contained the cream of her poetry written during her entire literary career which spanned nearly fifty years.⁹² The title poem, "In That Day," was first written in 1930, but at that time, it met with rejection from editors who were not ready for a poem which prophesied the end of the world. (The poem was based on a passage in the Bible, Revelations 16:20.) However, after World War II, the poem was readily accepted and widely reprinted. When Ward resubmitted the poem in 1946, she retained the original text except for one line: the third line of the third stanza was changed from "Not the shadow of a sound" to "After that first great sound" in order to reflect the atomic bomb which had become a reality in 1945.⁹³

And every island fled away
and the mountains were not found
nor were the rivers found;
the cities and the wheat-white plains
were swallowed underground
and the void sucked in the ground;

the oceans turned to flying mist
and vanished without sound
after that first great sound

and the race of men went with the rest
as Jahweh willed it should.
It was fitting that it should.

There was a nothingness of dark
where once the planets stood,
where once they sloped and stood,

and God looked on His handiwork
and saw that it was good--
the clean clear space was good.⁹³

Life was too generous to Ward in the number of years it allowed her to live. After she had sustained a broken hip injury which never properly healed and Merle had suffered a stroke plus other ailments, both were forced to reside in a Wellington nursing home beginning in July, 1970. May was confined to a wheelchair by this time, which meant that her mind--still young and craving activity--was entrapped in a crippled body. She no longer enjoyed the companionship of her husband whose traditional good humor had turned to belligerence as his health declined. Ward longed to "join the angels" and was granted her wish on July 11, 1975, four years after Merle's death.⁹⁵ However, to those who knew her and to those who read her poetry, May Williams Ward is still very much

alive.

I shall be energy loosed, I hope,
Not a calm, in eternity.
I am a goer, a doer, a dope
For action, and dull it would be
Just simply to rest in peace evermore--
I can't make it seem like me.

I hope that a crackle, a busy sound
Or a pinpoint gleam of fun
Springs up in your mind when your thought comes
 around
To me when my life is done;
So once in awhile take a leap and a bound
For me . . . it will please me right down to the
 ground
And welcome you are to the pun.⁹⁶

NOTES

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