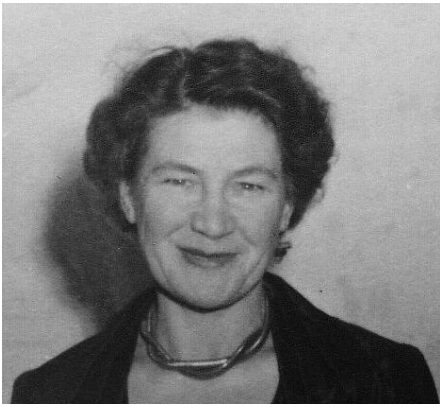


### Mary Eggar



It is fitting that this celebration of Mary's life is taking place in this lovely church, where she worshipped so often. Mary lived for many years in Bentley. Her father was a housemaster at Eton, where Mary was born on 10 May 1902, at Willowbrook House, in the College grounds. She lived there for more than a decade. Mary loved her mother and her father deeply, and spoke of them often. When she was a child, Mary used often to stay with her Aunt Sally on Green Farm. In those days, many of the farms in and around Bentley were owned by members of the Eggar family. In fact, the Eggar family in Bentley dates back at least 450 years, and there are many Eggar

graves in the churchyard. Sadly, there are no Eggars living here now. Mary had four brothers, Dougal, David, Michael and Martin, all of whom Mary loved dearly. When their father retired from Eton, the family moved to Inwoods, near Jenkyn Place. Mary's brothers, together with other family members, made up a cricket team which on several occasions played the Bentley village team. Wherever she lived Mary kept a framed photograph of those young men, and referred to them with great affection. As well as this being a fitting place, it is also an appropriate date on which to remember Mary. She was of the generation whose contemporaries went to fight in the Great War, and, in so many cases, did not return. She was therefore able to teach the war poetry with special feeling.

After her parents died, Mary and her brother David bought Bury Court Cottage, which, of course, is very close to this church, on the lane which leads to Bury Court Farm. When David married, he moved to Farnham, and Mary stayed on in Bury Court Cottage, where she was very happy, until she retired from teaching. Mary's niece, Diana, whose parents lived in South America, came, aged 13, to boarding school in England from 1954. Mary was her guardian during this period, and Diana stayed at Bury Court Cottage for most of her school holidays. Mary understood Diana's need for young company, and often had Diana's cousins, Angela, Gillian, Patrick and Ruth to stay. They have fond memories of long country walks, swimming in the River Wey, collecting milk from Bury Court Farm, and visits to the Castle Theatre. Once, Ruth, aged nine or ten, won a live pig at the village fete. When she said that she did not think her parents would welcome a pig at home, she was given a pound note instead – serious money in the 1950s. In later years, Diana's sisters, Veronica and Elizabeth, also came to England to school, and Mary often had them to stay, too.

Mary taught at Farnham Girls' Grammar School from 1944 until her retirement in 1962. There are here today former pupils representing the whole of Mary's long service at the school, a fact which says everything about our affection and respect for her. I am sure I speak for us all in thanking Diana and the rest of Mary's family for welcoming us so warmly on this occasion, and on the occasion of Mary's hundredth birthday. I feel particularly honoured to have been asked to speak about Mary, and I am conscious that this is an essay for her which I had better get right.

After attending schools in Windsor and Farnham, Mary read English at King's College, London, thus becoming one of an early generation of bright young women who were accepted on equal terms with men as undergraduates. She said that while she was living in London she took full advantage of the opportunity to indulge her love of the theatre, sometimes at the expense of her studies. She need not have felt guilty, however, as all that theatrical experience was to stand her in good stead as a teacher and as a director. Mary qualified as a teacher at Oxford, and taught in girls' boarding schools until World War II. She returned to Bentley to be with her parents, and accepted a post at her old school, Farnham Girls' Grammar School. When Mary first arrived there, because it was still war-time, girls from Greycoat School in Westminster had been evacuated to Farnham and to the school. The teaching staff were therefore required to teach pupils in two shifts, one in the mornings and the other in the afternoons. Mary was appointed in due course as Head of English, and she taught generations of girls to enjoy literature and language.

Mary was also a good and kind friend to her pupils. Many of us have happy memories of Mary's hospitality at Bury Court Cottage. I remember learning to enjoy red wine there (at a respectable age, naturally), and also how to handle Tortie, the unpredictable tortoiseshell cat otherwise known as The Slasher. It was fun being introduced to members of Mary's family, and to her more grown-up friends. One I particularly remember is Margaret Field, known affectionately to Mary as Mog. Margaret is now a hundred, and apparently still remembers those of us who sometimes frequented Bury Court Cottage. I also remember Mary's godson, Andrew Rowe, of whom Mary was particularly fond. Before he became an MP, Andrew was a master at Eton, and I remember being taken by Mary to see a wonderful stained glass window designed by John Piper which had been installed in the chapel at Eton. (The Bentley connection was further strengthened through Andrew, as he was a grandson of Canon Storr, who was rector of Bentley from 1916 to 1921.) Mary was, of course, a great supporter of the Castle Theatre in Farnham, and she took me to see my first show there. I cannot claim that it was a significant cultural experience (the show that week was *Dial M for Murder*), but I was thrilled to be taken, and loved the Castle Theatre thereafter.

As a teacher, Mary had a light touch, but she commanded the respect of both her pupils and her colleagues. She had a style all her own, in that she could appear to be slightly vague and less than totally organised, but because she took such an interest in her pupils she knew exactly how much to expect from each one. I still flinch to remember her written comment on one of my essays: "You do not need to use exclamation marks to show you are being funny." Ouch. But I also remember the glow I felt when, on another, more honest essay, she wrote, "Delightful. A+." You had to work for a really good mark from Mary. Discipline was not usually an issue in her lessons, probably because she loved her subject so much that we, too, were fascinated, and also because she was not prepared to waste her time. My friends and I still have as a mantra when remembering Mary, "Elizabeth Stokes, go to the library." This line would be delivered, entirely without rancour, as Mary arrived to begin her lesson. So poor Libby, who hadn't actually had time to start a riot, would trail off to the library, where she must have spent her time to good effect, because she got a respectable grade at 'O' level.

Mary taught all forms of poetry and prose with skill and insight, and of course, her first love was the theatre. Many of us remember school trips by train from Farnham to Stratford, to visit the Royal Shakespeare Theatre. On one such occasion, having successfully deposited a large group of excited schoolgirls near the theatre to amuse themselves for a while before the performance, Mary took herself into the theatre for some well-earned light refreshment. On looking out of a window she was startled to see alarming numbers of her pupils steering themselves about in boats on the river. Fortunately, no-one fell in and no-one missed the performance.

When Laurence Olivier starred in the film versions of *Richard III* and *Henry V*, Mary escorted large groups of girls to the Regal Cinema in Farnham. I remember her expressing the view that, had Shakespeare lived in the twentieth century, he might well have written for the cinema. I was taken aback by the heresy as I perceived it, but of course she had made an interesting point – witness the number of successful screen versions of the plays in recent years.

Mary directed many outstanding school plays, including several of Shakespeare's. A landmark production was *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which, for the first time juniors as well as seniors were allowed to perform. Later, a production of *As You Like It* was equally popular with all age-groups. Members of the Old Girls' Association joined with current pupils to play in Clement Dane's *Will Shakespeare*. Mary was clearly good at bringing groups together in her productions. In the 1950s she even managed to prevail upon the management to allow pupils from the Boys' Grammar School to join the girls, in productions of *Quiet Weekend* and *She Stoops to Conquer*. There was much excitement, and Mary was no doubt indirectly responsible for several teenage romances among the young thespians. Bill Wallis, now a nationally renowned actor, was one of her protégés. Jeffrey Tate, who went on to become a doctor and also subsequently a distinguished conductor, was another.

Other highly successful productions which are still remembered with pleasure included *The Rose and the Ring*, and *Toad of Toad Hall*. *The Barretts of Wimpole Street* was a particular *tour de force* in that all the parts, including those of the brothers and, not least, the overbearing father, were played to good effect by girls. Another of Mary's radical ventures was a highly successful all-girls production of *Hamlet* in 1960. It was to be several decades later that Fiona Shaw's Richard II and Vanessa Redgrave's Prospero were to be seen on the London stage.

Although we remember Mary best as an inspired teacher of literature, she was also the best teacher of the English language I have ever encountered. Her teaching of those mysteries, clause analysis and parsing, were masterpieces of clarity. Because of Mary's influence in encouraging a love of language and literature, a number of her pupils went on to teach English and Drama, and to work in theatre and television, and in speech therapy. Mary was the reason I went into teaching, to the considerable surprise of my family. She was delighted at my decision, but was characteristically bemused when I told her in later years that her influence and example had prompted it.

On her retirement Mary moved to Holcombe Rogus in Devon. Her mother, Amy Copleston, had come from Devon, and as a child Mary had spent many of her holidays at her grandparents' home near Honiton. Mary's delightful cottage became a refuge for numbers of friends, family and former pupils. Such was her hospitality that she confessed that she frequently woke in the

mornings to wonder who was staying that week! She loved gardening, walking, and her succession of dogs, especially her Dalmatians. There was Duff, who was a gentleman, and, in later years, George, who was delinquent, and Hookie, who was not wholly Dalmatian, and was in any case mad. After that Mary moved on to something smaller, and took on, not one, but two daschshunds. All her dogs were greatly loved and played important roles in her life. Mary's strong connection with Bentley was maintained, and during the early years of her retirement, at the request of the Rector, Churchwardens and the PCC at St Mary's, she wrote a scholarly and very readable history of the church and village. While the research for this was in progress, Mary would refer to it as her *magnum opus*.

It was typical of Mary that she continued to be interested in her former pupils when we went off to higher education and careers, when we acquired husbands and families, and at every subsequent stage in our lives. She visited me at college, and was an instant hit with my friends there. When I began my first teaching job, and was living in a rather dismal flat in Windsor, Mary arrived with comforts, in the shape of a radio and a heater. Our families loved Mary, too. She gave a reading at my wedding (despite having a dreadful cold at the time), she was present at my daughter's baptism, and at my stepdaughter's wedding. She came on several family holidays with us, and was always ready for an adventure. I know that other former pupils have similar good memories.

After a few years in Holcombe Rogus, Mary decided that she would like to return to Bentley, but this was not easy, as house prices here had far outstripped those in the West Country. Instead, she bought a little cottage, which she called The Rabbit Hutch, in Badshot Lea. She was content there, but was delighted a few years later when the Pike family offered to rent her their 'granny' cottage at Ganwells, here in Bentley. On her return to the Farnham area, Mary had been warmly welcomed back as President of the FGGS Old Girls' Association. She enjoyed renewing local friendships, supporting the Redgrave Theatre, and occasionally going to London shows. During her late 70s she came with Eric and me to a marathon seven-hour production of *Nicholas Nickleby*. We were concerned that she might be tired. Not a bit of it – she loved it.

In October 1986, following a car accident, Mary decided to give up driving, and this was probably an incentive for her move to Winchester. An additional factor was her knowledge that the Pikes would soon need the cottage for their son's family. She moved to the Friary in March 1987, and lived there for almost a year. When it changed hands and became too expensive for her, she moved to Cambria House, where she remained for the next fourteen years. Always a devout Christian, she enjoyed attending the cathedral regularly, and, expressing her involvement practically, she became a 'holy duster', and faithfully polished rows of Cathedral chairs for years. She continued to enjoy walking, and loved taking the housekeeper's dog with her. During this time she introduced me to another enjoyable beverage – vodka mixed with campari and orange juice. I recommend it – but try it at home. It has quite a kick.

Mary celebrated her centenary in May. A small gathering of family and friends, together with the Mayor of Winchester, celebrated with tea and birthday cake, and were able to admire her greetings from the Queen and from the government. A week later a larger gathering had a jolly time toasting Mary at a party organised by Diana at a local hotel. Mary received her guests in small groups at home during the course of the afternoon.



Because Cambria House was due to close, Mary moved to another Abbeyfield Home, in Reading, near Diana and Jim, just a few weeks after her birthday. A move at such an age cannot have been easy, but the home was lovely, and Mary received excellent care from the staff there. Diana's loving support and frequent visits added greatly to Mary's comfort. When I visited her just three weeks before her death, Mary still wanted to hear my family news, and we enjoyed a long, gossipy chat.

Mary had a gift for making everyone, and especially young people, feel that she saw them as equals, that she found them interesting, and that she was on their side. She never quite believed that she was an outstanding teacher, but those who benefited from her influence readily acknowledge its lasting effects. Perhaps her secret was to remain young in spirit. Her gift for friendship manifested itself in her warm hospitality, her unjudgemental acceptance of the people she loved, and her abiding interest in their lives.

Mary's was a good life, well lived, rich in years, and securely based on her Christian faith. I asked her once, when she was well into her nineties, "Would you like to reach a hundred?" "I can take it or leave it," she said. She was ready, when the time came, to go on the next leg of the journey. I believe that she was of like mind with Kent in *King Lear*:

*I have a journey, sir, shortly to go;  
My master calls me, I must not say no.*

St Mary's Church, Bentley  
11 November 2002