

Florence Ridley (1922-2021)

Andy Kelly

Florence Ridley, emerita professor UCLA English Department, passed away on January 16, 2021, at the age of ninety-eight, a victim of CoViD. She was living in retirement in her native city, Murfreesboro, Tennessee, and was in full command of mind and spirit to the end.

Florence first struck out from Murfreesboro to go to Randolph-Macon Woman's College in Lynchburg, Virginia, where she majored in Latin. She remained very close to her classmates, and eventually endowed a reading room in the Lipscomb Library there in honor of friends in her graduating class of 1944.

She went on to get a master's degree in English back in Tennessee, at Vanderbilt University. The title of her thesis was, "Humor in Hawthorne's Novels." Not satisfied with resting on her Americanist laurels, Florence took the radical step of going to Harvard-Radcliffe and working on a PhD. As soon as she obtained her degree in 1957, she headed west, for UCLA, where she was appointed an instructor. In those days, almost all new appointees were instructors before becoming assistant professor, which she moved to in 1959.

When UCLA originated in 1919 as the Southern Branch of the University of California, taking over the California State Normal School of Los Angeles, most of the faculty in the English Department were women, and women continued to be appointed for a while. Most of them, however, were not promoted beyond assistant professor, where they remained on annual contracts, until 1945, when Franklin Rolfe became chair, and the remaining women from the earlier days, Harriet MacKenzie and Margaret Carhart, along with some men in the same boat, were promoted to associate professor.

The one grand exception, of course, was Lily Bess Campbell, who arrived in 1922, and by 1931 was promoted to full professor; she was the most outstanding scholar in the department, and is memorialized in Campbell Hall. By the time Florence arrived, Lily Bess had retired, and the only other female colleague in the department was Ada Nisbet, who had received her doctorate from the UCLA English Department in 1947 (she was only the fifth PhD produced by the department up to that time). Ada became full professor in 1960, and when Florence achieved this rank in 1970, she was only the third woman to do so.

To memorialize her place in this trio of pioneers, Florence arranged an endowment for fellowships to be given preferentially to female doctoral students working in their favored fields, namely, Medieval Studies (Ridley), Renaissance Studies (Campbell), and Charles Dickens Studies (Nisbet). The endowment comes from the proceeds of her wonderful home in the "Gilette's Regent Square" district of northern Santa Monica, which she shared with Page Ackerman. Page, who passed away in 2006 at the age of ninety-three, succeeded Robert Vosper as UCLA Librarian, and was the first woman to head such a large library system. The house was the scene of many departmental and medieval parties, and Florence deeded it to the University to benefit the Department of English.

This "good deed" of Florence's was the culmination of her many years as a stalwart of the department, one of our loyalest and most enthusiastic members and supporters. When she arrived at UCLA, the other medievalist in the department at that

time was, of course, Will Matthews, and together Will and Florence made a great team. At Harvard, Florence had specialized in the Scottish Chaucerians, and she continued to champion these fascinating but neglected authors here in the West. She was chosen to treat them in the new edition of the prestigious *Well's Manual*, that is, *A Manual of the Writings in Middle English*, and the 300 meticulous pages that she contributed on *The Middle Scots Writers* stand to this day as the last authoritative word on the subject and a monument to her scholarship.

One noteworthy contribution that she made in a related area was her edition of *Surrey's Translation of Vergil's Aeneid*, in which she shows in exacting detail the influence upon Surrey of the Scottish Chaucerian Gavin Douglas.

But, even granted her high reputation in this northern field, Florence is perhaps better known as a scholar of Chaucer himself, and her monograph on *Chaucer's Prioress and the Critics* became and remains a classic in the field, refreshing for its common sense in an area that has given rise to wild and shaky exaggerations.

Because of her standing in this bailiwick of Chaucerian research, Larry Benson at Harvard asked Florence to write the introductions and notes to the Prioress in the *General Prologue*, the *Prioress's Tale*, and the *Second Nun's Tale* (the Legend of St. Cecilia) for the up-dated *Complete Works of Chaucer*, known as the *Riverside Chaucer*. Her words of wisdom there have served as an inspiration for students—and scholars—for over three decades now. Let me give just one example of her unerring and enduring critical sense: “Though the *Prioress's Tale* is adapted for a female speaker...it was not necessarily written with the Prioress of the General Prologue in mind, since it fits her portrait only in being a celebration of the Virgin with stress upon a tenderness for small creatures, without reference to her courtly elegance and expensive tastes, and it has nothing about it of the idealized romance hero or satirized nun.” Would that other Chaucerians could keep these points in mind!

Florence was not only an extraordinarily good departmental citizen, even after she retired in 1993, but also a dedicated participant in the running of UCLA as a whole. She was on almost every important committee that one can think of, and served conscientiously and diligently. Most notably, she was a member of the Graduate Council, which monitors and reviews all of the graduate programs on the campus, and she served as its chair, and also as associate dean of the Graduate Division. She was also a member of the time-consuming but highly important Council on Academic Personnel (which handles the promotions of the entire UCLA faculty); and from there she went on to become Vice-Chair and then Chair of the Academic Senate—the highest faculty position on campus.

Outside of UCLA, she was also renowned. She became vice-president and then president of the Medieval Association of the Pacific, the largest and most effective of the regional medieval organizations serving the interests of the mother-organization, the Medieval Academy of America. She also took her turn serving on the Council of the Academy itself. Finally, she was given the high honor of being elected a Fellow of the Medieval Academy, and then was appointed President of the Fellows, a post she filled from 2002 to 2005. It was a fitting climax to her long years of service to our profession.