Mary Martin McLaughlin, Always Independent

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On June 26, 2006, the *New York Times* published the obituary of an independent scholar. Mary Martin McLaughlin wasn't a scholar/novelist or scholar/business tycoon. She was first, foremost, and always a serious medieval historian. She spent most of her life working on what to most people is an obscure corner of history, the life of Heloise, first abbess of the Paraclete, a convent in France. Most people know of Heloise through her torrid and tragic love affair with Peter Abelard, which has been the subject of novels, plays, films and even an opera.

But Mary didn't focus on the steamy side of Heloise's life; rather she celebrated the accomplishments and writings of Heloise the woman outside of her connection to Abelard. Mary was refining her two-volume study of Heloise at the time of her death. It will be published soon, probably in a typically small academic print run.

So why was her life worthy of a column in the *Times*? When Mary was in graduate school in the 1940s, she was told bluntly that, as a woman, her only choice would be to find a job at a women's college. Not much was expected of her professionally. The colleges she taught at were Wellesley and Vassar. However, as soon as she could manage it financially, Mary left the classroom to become an independent scholar.

Few of us have the luxury of devoting our lives to pure scholarly research. Mary, as she said, had been "extremely fortunate." That may have been why she was such a strong supporter of other independent scholars. She also encouraged those who took on the challenge of putting women's lives and accomplishments into the history books. Her work went slowly and her publications were few, partly because she spent so much time helping others in their work. She read manuscripts, advised on publication options, and worked on a database of women in the Middle Ages, among many other activities. Most of all, she encouraged other medievalists to expand their views on what makes a scholar. When she published, she never added an academic affiliation. She expected her work to be judged on its merits alone.

I was lucky enough to benefit from Mary's generosity. When I started working on Heloise as a minor character in a mystery novel, Mary didn't suggest that my work wasn't real scholarship. She was as determined as I was that I be true to the real Heloise. To that end, she interrupted her work to call me with newly discovered information and took time to proofread some of the book. I believe she was as proud of the results as if I had written a ground-breaking monograph.

As the *Times* obituary proves, Mary showed the academic world what an independent scholar can accomplish.[1] Even more, she was a friend and inspiration to all those who believe that true scholarship isn't solely the property of academia.

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End Note

1. Margalit Fox. "Mary Martin McLaughlin." Obituary. *The New York Times.* 26 June 2006. Online access <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/06/26/myregion/26mclaughlin.html>.