Mary Martin McLaughlin, eminent medieval historian, didn’t come to Kalamazoo during the 2006 International Conference of Medieval Studies for the “Medieval Foremothers” symposium we held in her honor because she was afraid she might catch a cold. She feared that she would lose precious time she needed to finish her long-delayed books on the abbess Heloise and her companion Abelard. This was not an unreasonable fear for an eighty-seven-year-old woman who had survived several grave illnesses, but she found the decision awkward because she so esteemed those—attendees and speakers alike—who were celebrating her. She fretted about the disappointment her absence would cause those who (in her words) had gone to such trouble. Little did she or we know that this symposium would become a form of memorial. Mary was hospitalized just as the Kalamazoo conference was ending, stricken not by a cold but once more by cancer. This time she fell victim to that struggle. Before Mary died, I traveled to Millbrook to see her one last time. I brought her photos from the Kalamazoo symposium and copies of the presentations that had been given in her honor. She was avid to see them and very grateful to all. She died a “sumptuous death” medieval fashion: in her own peaceful home, visited by a succession of friends bidding farewell, lovingly attended by her family and her emphatic “boys,” the cats Maurice and M. le Prince, on June 8, 2006.

Her major worry, even in deathbed pain, was that her two unfinished manuscripts on Heloise and Abelard be finished and printed. We had been working on these manuscripts together for almost a decade. It consoled her when I promised that I would complete the project and get the volumes to press. With the help of others, I hope to have her two volumes at press by the fall of 2007. The translations will be in Heloise and Abelard: Their Collected Correspondence and Related Writings and the biography in Heloise and the Paraclete.
As befits a child of the Northern Plains, Mary Martin McLaughlin (born into a cosmopolitan merchant family in Grand Island, Nebraska, on April 15, 1919) guarded her independence and privacy, balancing her fierce capacities of mind and word with a gentle demeanor and exquisite courtesy. She was a superb professional colleague, open to all and condescending to none. Her strongest remark, as her friends note, was usually “Ah, well,” but she had no compunction about scolding loudly any malefactor (especially of the political variety) whom she observed on public television’s nightly news. You can imagine, since I live in Texas, how many early evening phone calls I received from her in regard to the 2000–2008 U.S. president: she’d begin with a sputter—“That man!”—and end with “Ah, well.”

She was a deeply thoughtful friend. It’s hard to imagine how she found time for her work since the world constantly knocked on her door in Millbrook and she opened her door to the encumbrances as well as pleasures of companionship and collegiality. Historian J0 Ann McNamara is impressed by Mary’s store of knowledge: “Right to the end, she was on top of the recent literature and sharp in her critical abilities. I don’t know anyone who seemed to have a better grip on rising young people in her field or who was readier to put out a helping hand. The nuns project alone gave needed employment to several young women (like Connie Berman) then struggling with the job crisis.” One of Mary’s other particularly good friends, historian and novelist Sharan Newman, was in frequent conversation with Mary over the years, especially about Abelard and Heloise (Sharan dedicated her 2002 novel *Heresy* to Mary); she tells a lovely story about Mary’s very cool modernity. Newman’s daughter “thought Mary one of the most extraordinary people she had ever met. Mary gave her a hand-colored Beardsley drawing because the design in the corner matched the tattoo on her daughter’s arm. The world is a bit more drab now.”

Mary was a magnificent Latinist. We American medievalists owe much to rigorous early classics teachers who spread across our multicultural land. They not only drilled the young in Latin grammar and rhetoric but also inspired them with delight in classical literature and history. Mary was lucky in her teachers: she had fine Latin teachers both as a girl and as an advanced student at the
land-grant University of Nebraska, from which she was graduated with an AB in 1940 and AM in 1941. She moved east to New York, studying at Columbia University from 1941–43 under the direction of medievalists Lynn Thorndike (then working on his *University Records and Life in the Middle Ages*) and Austin Evans (who in Mary’s words, “found compelling any subject involving medieval heresy”). She taught at two of the Seven Sisters—at Wellesley from 1943–45, followed by Vassar from 1945–48—but then she returned home to the University of Nebraska to teach as she finished writing her dissertation. Columbia awarded her the PhD in History in 1954, for *Intellectual Freedom and its Limitations in the University of Paris in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries*, which she finally released for publication a quarter-century later through Arno Press (1977). She again dedicated herself to teaching at Vassar, returning from 1958–65, but even that lovely place was too constricting to allow her the mental space to pursue her scholarly interests. After an aggregate of twenty-two years of teaching, she retired in 1965 to the elegantly snug historic home in Millbrook, New York, which she shared with Vassar art historian Pamela Askew, to undertake her work as an independent scholar.

Of course, one can say that this decision was underwritten by the privilege both of financial independence and the aid of several distinguished fellowships, including an Ingram Merrill Foundation Fellowship in 1965–66 that marked the beginning of the newly independent phase of her career. That first fellowship was a behest of poet James Merrill; Mary and Pamela’s friend, poet Elizabeth Bishop, recommended Mary for the grant. She received further fellowships from (among others) the American Philosophical Society and the ACLS (and later in life from Barnard College, and from the University of Pennsylvania as Lilly Endowment Fellow). I suspect, however, that Mary would have chosen the private scholar’s life in any case, even in poverty. She was never entirely comfortable with institutional servitude.

Mary described herself as a dependent scholar—always depending on collaboration in various forms, starting with the “footnote [...] the symbol as well as the vehicle of our dependence.” Her collaborations were writ small and large. They forcefully shape our field. In fact, her first collaborative book was published before she
completed her dissertation. Mary received an instructorship at Vassar
to teach James Bruce Ross’ courses in medieval history when Ross
was appointed Assistant Dean of Vassar College. (I was deluded for
many years by my false presumption that J.B.’s ‘male’ name reflected
her gender.) Mary and J.B. spent many years collaborating on an
unfinished book on the major themes and issues in the history of
medieval women that they entitled *Perilous Quests: Women’s Initiatives
in Western History from Late Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*. But
early on, prompted by Viking Press, McLaughlin collaborated
with Ross on the *Portable Medieval Reader* (1949) and then on
the *Renaissance Reader* (1953) to produce provocative anthologies
of historical and literary primary texts. As Mary said, “Viking
Portables were the first such collections of sources and various texts
intended for general readers, as well as for students, and organized in
appropriate interpretive categories. I can say, too, that creating these
anthologies as well as teaching in the then source-oriented Vassar
style, greatly enlarged my acquaintance with the vast chorus of voices
that still speak from these centuries and confirmed my addiction
to working directly with the texts, verbal and visual [...] on which
our studies are founded.” Viking long ago became a subsidiary of
Penguin Books, but some traces remain: in all its corporate guises, it
has continued to publish these two staunch *Readers*, still available in
2007. They have introduced generation after generation to our fields.
When Mary died, the *Portable Medieval Reader* had been in print
continuously for fifty-seven years. I am sure that some of you, like
me, first met the Middle Ages on its pages.

At our recent “Medieval Foremothers” symposium, Ann Matter
insightfully traced Mary’s achievement as a book reviewer: her “Mary
Martin McLaughlin in Review” demonstrates the range and depth of
Mary’s erudition. Were we to leave aside Mary’s keen scholarship and
consider only her book reviews, we would surely still be awed by her
early insights into what she named “women’s history.” McLaughlin
generously dispensed herself in her many reviews, but it was her
capacious “Abelard as Autobiographer: The Motives and Meaning of
His Story of Calamities,” published in *Speculum* (1967), that solidified
her international scholarly reputation. She devoted the rest of her
scholarly career to the explication of medieval monastic life (especially
through Abelard and Heloise) and of medieval family life.
Mary was *au courant* to her bones, but she was, alas, sometimes waylaid by the shock of the new. As part of a select group who gave papers at the famous Cluny conference on Peter Abelard and Peter the Venerable in 1972, she heard Cal Tech historian John Benton’s shot heard ’round our little world with his seemingly scientific claim that the whole Abelard–Heloise correspondence was an intricate fake. Though she published her influential “Peter Abelard and the Dignity of Women: Twelfth Century ‘Feminism’ in Theory and Practice” in the symposium volume, *Pierre Abélard, Pierre le Vénérable: Les courants philosophiques, littéraires et artistiques en Occident au milieu du XIIe siècle* (1975), Mary continued to recoil from the impact of Benton’s views. Benton later retracted his argument, using the empirical and grammatical evidence he had used to construct it, but Mary literally spent decades working through the argument to her own satisfaction. She focused increasingly on Heloise’s life and work separate from that of Abelard. Ironically, more than a quarter-century later, she found herself once more hamstrung (but allied with her very dear friend Giles Constable among others) by an argument about authenticity—this time, Constant Mews’s assertions of authenticity in *The Lost Love Letters of Heloise and Abelard: Perceptions of Dialogue in Twelfth-Century France* (1999).

In the interim, as she pondered Heloise and pursued her archival work on the Paraclete and its fate, she undertook an extensive study known to most of the readers of this journal. “Survivors and Surrogates: Children and Parents in Western Society, Ninth to Thirteenth Century” is a landmark in the field, which Mary wrote for the chronological anthology *The History of Childhood* (New York, 1974) at the request of volume editor Lloyd de Mause. In a speech I invited her to give in Kalamazoo several years ago, Mary described their relationship and fruits in these words:

> Though this project eventually assembled a group of quite respectable scholars to explore various aspects of childhood from late antiquity to the nineteenth century, it was far from academic in its inspiration. Presumably sponsored by a mysterious organization called the Association for Applied Psychoanalysis, it was in fact inspired and directed by a very enthusiastic person who was also a single-minded autodidact obsessed by his conception of the horrors of childhood through the ages. Its history, as he repeatedly reminded us, was ‘a nightmare from which
we are only beginning to awaken.' Although it's safe to say that none of the historians who participated in this project shared our editor's utterly nightmarish vision, we were all perhaps in some measure influenced by so negative a starting-point. But for me the exploration and discoveries of this virtually uncharted hinterland during several medieval centuries was a stunning revelation, something of an epiphany [...] In all of my years as a historian, I have never felt so sharply the sense of mystery and silence that shrouds the most fundamental aspects of human experience and the excitement that rewarded even tentative efforts to penetrate this silence. Exploratory as it was in many respects, I think that my investigation did establish the eleventh to thirteenth centuries as a turning-point in the concept of childhood and to some extent in the relations of children and parents.

For her searing study, Mary was awarded best article prize by the Berkshire Conference of Women's Historians in 1975. She brought a focus on medieval women's lives to that burgeoning and bumptious group of feminist scholars just as "The Berks" entered its second-wave feminist glory days. In subsequent years she wrote notable pieces on medieval women for explicitly feminist journals such as Signs. She took some pride in the way her studies stimulated the growth of the field. After Pamela Askew's death in 1997, Mary fulfilled what she deemed a debt of honor by ensuring that her friend's major work was completed.

Her collaborative impulse found a broad field when she and Barnard historian Suzanne Wemple (later assisted by Heath Dillard and Connie Berman) decided to collect and disseminate the relatively richly documented individual and communal lives of medieval European religious women. The aim was to produce three comprehensive, coordinated research instruments: a repertory of women's communities in the Latin West before 1500; a bibliography of notable women variously associated with these communities, and an international bibliography of modern studies relating to medieval women's religious life. Mary initiated and served as Research Director for this long-term research project, then called "Women's Religious Life and Communities, 500–1500," which was funded by the NEH and sponsored by Barnard College from 1982–87. Her description of their findings is encapsulated in her "Looking for Medieval Women: An Interim Report on the Project: Women's Religious Life and Communities, 500–1500," in Medieval Prosopography (1987). Unlike the language of the original documents, the computer language
the language of the original documents, the computer language
that was chosen to maintain these records became inaccessible and
technologically obsolescent. Katherine Gill and Lisa Bitel rescued the
project, which now thrives at USC under Lisa’s direction. “Monastic
Matrix” is mounted on the Internet and shines as a fine example of
long-term scholarly collaboration <http://monasticmatrix.usc.edu>. That
project was not the last in which Mary wrestled with the
computer—her enemy, not her tool—and almost lost all. Much of
the final decade of her life was spent trying to master new computer
programs in order to finish her work on her favorite (“if at times
extremely trying”) collaborators, Heloise and Abelard. During this
time, she had two prominent student assistants named Kathryne/
Katherine who helped especially with technical matters: one was my
excellent student (now finishing law school) Kathryne Martin Morris
and the other was the young medieval historian Katherine Allen
Smith. We owe thanks to each. Partly inspired by Mary’s early work
and convinced that Heloise’s work and life merited attention separate
from Abelard, I decided about a decade ago to collect essays devoted
to the abbess. Mary agreed to contribute an essay, “Heloise the
Abbess: The Expansion of the Paraclete,” to Listening to Heloise, ed.
Bonnie Wheeler (1999). At first Mary and I entered a conversation,
and then a friendship, and it was a joy. She agreed to finish her
volumes for publication in a book series I edit (The New Middle
Ages, Palgrave Macmillan). Her focus on Heloise at the Paraclete is
part of the “rescue operation” she sees at the heart of their lives—the
second chance that expressed a new collaboration: “Abelard’s rescue of
Heloise and her nuns after the seizure of their abbey of Argenteuil by
Suger of Saint-Denis and her rescue of Abelard from his ‘murderous’
monks by offering him the haven of the Paraclete.” Mary left an
almost completed biography of Heloise as well as a beautiful new
translation of their correspondence. In Mary’s view:

The whole represents an achievement unparalleled in the monastic
literature of the twelfth century. It would give the Paraclete texts
that no other women’s community could boast. Their talents
produced not only an “institute” or “rule” for nuns, along with the
letters that preceded it, but also the hymns, sermons, treatises, and
a second dialogue, the Problemata or Questions, which completed a
distinctive and coherent monastic program. Embracing virtually every
aspect of life at the Paraclete, from its daily routine to its scriptural studies, this extraordinarily personal program gave shape to a “feminized” version of the “textual community” that is, as concept and reality, perceptively examined in Brian Stock’s recent study. In this community and the texts of its founders, moreover, the influences of two particularly innovative movements of the twelfth century, the ideas of an “intellectual renascence” and the ideals of an “evangelical awakening” came together, to achieve their most original contemporary embodiment.

Mary’s family and well-wishers (and especially her devoted niece and nephew-in-law, Kathleen and Richard Derringer) tried to help her finish the project. We all knew it could have been done in mirror images if she simply wrote it in her lovely hand. Several generations of student assistants came and went but Mary could not put asunder all that had been joined together. Her collaboration with Heloise and Abelard never ended.

But she took some nice breaks. In February 1991, Caroline Walker Bynum organized a workshop on “Medieval Religious Women” at Columbia University-Barnard College in her honor and Mary delighted in that occasion. As the millennium turned, I enticed her to Kalamazoo to speak about her life and work. Only a few years ago, Lester Little invited her to join the American Academy in Rome for a stint: the irresistible combination of Rome and the company of such dear friends as Lester pleased her no end. She felt honored in her mid-eighties to be elected a Fellow of the Medieval Academy.

It is a sweet solace, perhaps especially for feminist scholars, to know that Mary left her impressive medieval historian’s library not to an institution but rather to Katherine Allen Smith, a protégée and sometimes research assistant. This Vassar graduate, whose 2004 dissertation was directed by Penelope Johnson at NYU, has entered the profession as a young medieval historian (now an assistant professor at the University of Puget Sound). My husband Jeremy duQ. Adams and I spent some precious time with Mary at Millbrook. I remember especially a Thanksgiving weekend together. She worried over the arrangements, the household clutter, and the menu. Only after her feast, as we faced the bones and the washing up, did we all admit to each other that we found turkey to be an optional part of the holiday. And only then did Mary admit that wild turkey sometimes
wandered on her lovely acres and she had paled at the idea of eating one. After that, the dining table found its best use as a collective desk, covered with flurries of notes, voices mixed exuberantly as we tried alternate translations of twelfth-century texts. In the company of these two consummate Latinists who prowled like lions over texts, I knew “sheer joy, the genuine article.”

Mary ended her autobiographical remarks several years ago with this statement about her view of the historian’s dilemma:

Although we can thus know from the correspondence and their other works a good deal about the experience and aspirations of Heloise and Abelard, especially during a single decade, the 1130s, we soon find ourselves able to learn less and less. And finally, in this case as in so many others, we are confronted by that “silence” of which W. H. Auden reminds us in a few lines of his “Homage to Clio”: “[...] but we, at haphazard / And unseasonably, are brought / face to face, / By ones, Clio, with your silence.”

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End Note

1. All citations are taken from personal correspondence with the author.