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WHO *DID* WRITE THE NATIONS FAVOURITE POEM?

Article by Geoff Stephens

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This coming Remembrance Sunday, at hundreds of Memorial Services all over the country, the nation's favourite poem will be read out to hushed audiences. Songwriter Geoff Stephens, whose songs include There's A kind of Hush All Over The World, The Crying Game and Winchester Cathedral, has recorded a musical version of Do Not Stand At My Grave And Weep under the title To All My Loved Ones and below he traces his journey which began in 1989, to discover...

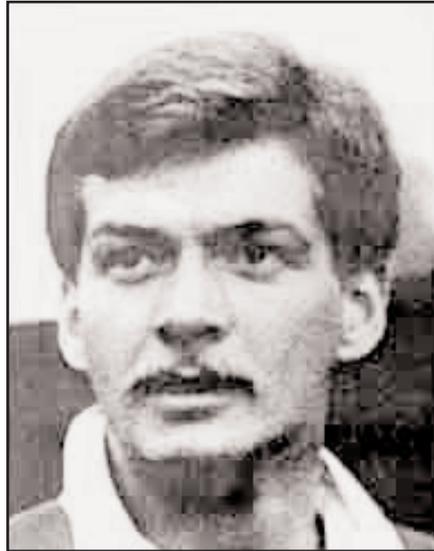
WHO DID WRITE THE NATION'S FAVOURITE POEM?

TO ALL MY LOVED ONES

*Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there I do not sleep
I am a thousand winds that blow
I am the diamond glint on snow
I am the sunlight on ripened grain
I am the gentle autumn rain
When you awake in the morning's hush
I am the swift uplifting rush
Of quiet birds in circled flight
I am the soft stars that shine at night
Do not stand at my grave and cry
I am not there, I did not die.*

In 1996, BBC TV's Bookworm ran a competition to discover the Nation's Favourite Poem, which was published in book form. In the preface and almost apologetically, not in the body of the book, Gryff Rees-Jones states: "the unexpected poetry success of the year from Bookworm's point of view... provoked an extraordinary response... the requests started coming in almost immediately and over the following weeks the demand rose to a total of some thirty thousand...its origins remain a mystery. In some respects it became the nation's favourite poem by proxy and, despite it being outside the competition, we have decided to include it here, in prime, first past the post, poll position"

I first came across this beautiful poem in the Daily Mail, 10th March 1989. By now, most people know the story of how it was found in the possessions of Stephen Cummins, a young soldier killed in Northern Ireland.



Stephen Jeffrey Cummins, June 7, 1964 -
March 8, 1989

What remains a mystery however, is who actually wrote it. Stephen didn't, but Mary Frye, Gwydion Pendderwen, Joyce Fossen and Albert Spengler are but a few of the names put forward as being the author.

Surf the net or spend a day at your local library as I have done, and the mystery deepens. The consensus is split fairly evenly between "anonymous - from a Native American source" (Red Indian in other words) - and Mary Frye from Baltimore USA, with the odds slightly favouring the latter. Here are the pros and cons for both: -

A NATIVE AMERICAN SOURCE?

On first reading, one would think that the pantheistic imagery of the poem suggesting that the departed live on in the beautiful aspects of our natural surroundings, lends weight to the Native American source - at

least, that's what I and many others thought. But if so, someone extremely literate in the English language must have written or translated it. I'm not suggesting that extremely literate Native Americans do not exist, but that it simply reduces the odds somewhat. There aren't that many of them left, and those that are, usually take great pride in their cultural traditions - so much so that a poem of this quality and popularity would surely have been claimed as part of their tribal heritage. Then, one day when I was browsing through a reference magazine in the British Library, I was forced to make a sudden mental about-turn. Ann Landers, one of America's famed agony aunts, had asserted in her Washington Post column of October 19, 1986, that the poem was a prayer of the Makah Indians. David Kresh, Reference Specialist in Poetry at the US Library of Congress, had a Makah Indian friend, who dryly pointed out that the Makah do not have snow, or fields of grain, or gentle Autumn rain. He also added that most, if not all Native American traditions seldom favour the "I am still here with you approach" of this poem but prefer instead to get the spirit moving on away from the living as quickly as possible.

OR MARY FRYE?

There is perhaps more meat to the Mary Frye story, but at first sight the underlying bone seems somewhat fragile. Most of my findings are based on listening to an audiotape of a Canadian Broadcasting Company radio production, first aired in May 2000, entitled A Poetic Journey. Reporter Kelly Ryan backtracks the poem from its current elevated position at the top of the pop poem charts to its humble beginnings on a brown paper bag in Mary Frye's kitchen in Baltimore, Maryland USA

- well, let's say for the moment that's where we think it began, (give or take a few irreconcilable dates and one or two blatant omissions).

The cast of characters in this poorly-produced programme are led by Kelly Ryan herself who conducts disjointed, mostly dull and sometimes tearful interviews with, amongst others, two Canadian musicians, Kathy Martin and Eleanor Daly (both having set the poem to music), Peter Ackroyd, a retired English journalist and his poetry-teaching sister Juliette Lacey; Geoff and Sheila Cummins, parents of Stephen, the young soldier killed in Northern Ireland; Jeanne van Buren, daughter of the other very famous American agony aunt Abby van Buren who operated under the name of Dear Abby, and finally Mary Frye herself. Amazingly, this lady was interviewed at home in Baltimore on her 94th birthday, amid a jolly gathering of friends. Bearing in mind that the programme was first broadcast in May 2000, the interview could have taken place up to a year before then, which would make her possibly 97 or thereabouts at the present time. Unfortunately, I have not had the time or resources, as with other aspects of this story I would like to have explored, to find out if she is still alive.

A good part of the programme was devoted to the awesome growth in popularity of the poem in recent years, especially in North America; this was highlighted with annoyingly intrusive excerpts of news announcements of major disasters, reports of the Lockerbie aircraft crash, the loss of Swissair flight 111 into the sea off Nova Scotia and the Challenger space disaster. In between, we learn that the journalist, Peter Ackroyd, was as smitten as I was when I first came across the poem. In 1995, having

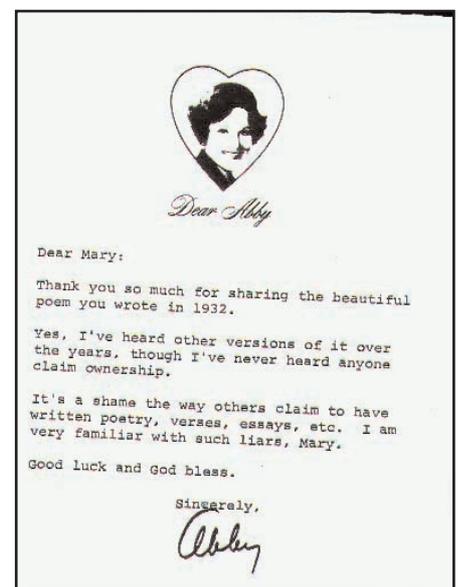
heard that 35,000 copies of the poem had been sent out after the Bookworm programme, he was intrigued that there was apparently no trace of the author whose words held such special meaning for so many people. He felt there should be recognition for the author of a poem, which had brought comfort to so many, so he embarked on a journey via the internet, libraries etc, to track down the elusive poet. He too, was led at first to the Pacific North West and Native American territory, only to find as I did through my British Library research that this area did not fit the bill in terms of its climate. However, he goes on to say that it was through talking to people in that region that took him to Baltimore and Mary Frye. Kelly Ryan avers on tape that he has written a book describing his search; if so, I can find no trace of it - although, if it is the same Peter Ackroyd, he is a noted biographer and has written many books, including several on London and its history, so his bibliography should be easy enough to track down. Ackroyd's sister, Juliette Lacey, throws interesting academic light on some of the ingredients that contribute to the magical quality of the poem, which I found very informative.

She attributes part of its strength to the use of Anglo-Saxon root words at the end of each line, eg weep, sleep, blow, snow, rain, grain etc; also the elemental qualities induced by the use of the basic things of life, like birds, stars, snow, sun, wind. According to Kelly Ryan, Juliette has written a play based on her brother Peter's search for the author. I hope it has more substance than his book.

STICKY GROUND?

With Jeanne van Buren (Dear Abby II) we start to get on sticky ground. Jeanne describes how her mother's

files were overflowing with letters claiming authorship of the poem. She cites four or five letters which go into great detail as to how, when and why the poem was written by husband, wife or friend. And this is where a loophole suddenly appears. Abby sets her researchers to work, and they come up with an answer. They seem to know who the real author might be. Jeanne says that as a result her mother rejects all these spurious claims. On the tape, Jeanne then reads out the letter addressed simply "Dear Mary".



Three things strike me here:

- 1) There is no address, just Dear Mary
- 2) she states baldly "I've never heard anyone claim ownership", in total contradiction of what Jeanne has related
- 3) the letter is undated.

Also I get a gut feeling that an all-American institution like Abby would not have written a line like "I am very familiar with such liars, Mary".

Now let's look at the webpage from CBC which gives details of "A Poetic Journey" (see below). There is a photograph of Margaret Schwarzkopf, the friend for whom Mary is supposed to have written

the poem, with "Linda and Snowball" - no mention of Linda or Snowball on the tape - photos of Stephens Cummins and Dear Abby and an irrelevant picture of the poem - astoundingly, there is no photo of Mary Frye!

According to the tape, Peter Ackroyd had by now managed to track Mary down, having got confirmation that the poet was alive and well from a Baltimore newspaper. Unfortunately, I've had no such luck. My enquiries to the Baltimore Chronicle brought this reply:

(http://radio.cbc.ca/programs/ideas/s_hows/poem/)

Greetings--

Have no info on Ms. Frye; however, checked the Internet and found this site, which may help you in your effort to make contact with her. Good luck!

Of course, this is the very website to which I have just referred. Been there, done that.

MARY'S STORY

Mary Frye sounds like a homely, no-nonsense, gutsy 94 yr old. Here's her story in her own words talking about Margaret Schwarzkopf, in 1932 her closest friend:

"Well, she was over from Germany, but her mother couldn't come - she was too old and crippled up and Hitler was just taking over and her mother wanted to get out of the country. Well, she worried all the time 'cos she wasn't getting any letters from her mother...and she got more and more and more worried. And we tried every way through the embassy, and you know, all that kind of stuff - and finally she got word that her mother died...and she practically had a nervous breakdown...and she just

cried and cried and cried...and then one day, we had gone to the store...and we came back with the stuff in brown paper bags and we'd sort it out on my kitchen table...and there was somethin', I don't know what it was, but somethin' I'd bought - and she started cryin' - she said my mother loved that - and I said oh Margaret, please don't cry - and she said, oh I can't help it - do you know what hurts me the most of all? - I never had the chance to stand at my mother's grave and say goodbye." Tearfully, Margaret went upstairs to her room. Mary had a pen, checking off the groceries, and all at once the poem came to her. She tore off a piece from one of the grocery bags and jotted it down. Soon after, Margaret came down, more self-composed, and Mary said to her: "I wrote a little poem - it's the way I feel about life and death - it might help you a little, I don't know". Margaret read the poem, threw her arms around Mary, and said: "I shall keep this forever". And she stopped crying.



Margaret Schwarzenkopf with Linda & Snowball

Margaret took the poem to work with her - and one of her fellow workers had a friend who worked in the Federal Printing Press. Copies of

the poem were made and given away. From that point on, over the ensuing years, the poem took on a life of it's own - in fact, of her original version, only the first and last three lines remain. Without detracting from Mary's original idea, time and someone, somewhere has excised four lines and introduced the beautiful, concise imagery for which the poem is now well known and so much loved. If we are to believe the contents of the CBC programme, (more on that subject shortly), here is Mary's original version as she wrote it in 1932:

*Do not stand at my grave and weep
I am not there, I do not sleep
I am in a thousand winds that blow
I am the softly falling snow
I am the gentle showers of rain
I am the fields of ripening grain
I am in the morning hush
I am in the graceful rush
Of beautiful birds in circling flight
I am the starshine of the night
I am in the flowers that bloom
I am in a quiet room
I am the birds that sing
I am in each lovely thing
Do not stand at my grave and cry
I am not there I do not die.*

There are a lot more "I ams" in Mary's early version. This would explain why one of Dear Abby's correspondents had claimed to have written the poem under the title I AM.

Here is a poem, purported to have been written by Mary and published by IDEALS magazine, of unknown date, which encompasses her thoughts on the success of her original poem:

*One day I wrote a poem, the words
came from my heart.
It passed along from friend to friend, its
message to impart.
I never dreamed these words of mine
would travel far and wide
Across God's mighty oceans and every
countryside.*

*From this I've learned that when you try
to help others with their grief
It will lighten all your sorrows and
bring you lasting peace*

I find this verse, with its greeting card overtones and folksy, homespun language, much more in keeping with the poem above than with the version now in common usage- so from that point of view, the story becomes much more believable. On the tape, Mary sounds genuinely at a loss to understand how her poem could have taken on such universal meaning. It also becomes clear that the poem is not in copyright - and being in the public domain, she has not received any remuneration for her work. This is what she has to say on this subject:

"I thought it belonged to the world - it didn't belong to me. I still feel that way...it was written out of love, for comfort - if I took money for it, it would lose its value... maybe I'm a nut. (I love that!)

WHAT'S THE ANSWER?

Where does all this leave us? As I have pointed out, there are many inconsistencies, not to say glaring gaps in this story as depicted in the CBC documentary - some of the facts are presented as factoids (to borrow a Mailerism). There is no

mention of any other poetry written by Mary Frye, no body of work written by her, and nothing about her education or her family life. Did she have a husband, children? Are we to assume that she is, in pop parlance, a one-hit wonder? All these questions may have to remain unanswered, but though some nagging uncertainties exist in my mind, I attribute these to some slipshod reporting and production by CBC rather than any devious attempts to make a "good story" out of nothing. I am inclined to go along with the programme's findings, that yes, Mary E Frye did write a poem which began "Do not stand at my grave and weep" for a close friend back in 1932 - but that this is not the poem we have come to know today. Perhaps, after all, there was a talented Native American who introduced lines like "I am the diamond glint on snow" and "when you awake in the morning's hush, I am the swift uplifting rush of quiet birds in circled flight". What I still find very puzzling is that outside of the CBC documentary, I have found very little information about Mary Frye. Put her name in any search engine on the Internet and it will invariably take you to hundreds of links to the poem itself, but not to the author. I find this surprising especially since the airing of the documentary should have generated

considerable interest in her. And what about Peter Ackroyd? His book may be fictitious, but as an established journalist one would have expected a write-up on the lady to have appeared somewhere.

Perhaps the answer lies in the arid words of a librarian at the US Library of Congress who responded to my e-mail as follows:

"Mary Frye seems to be the current favourite for the authorship, based on a newspaper interview with Ms. Frye long after the writing of the poem. Because Ms. Frye never attempted to copyright or publish the poem, documentary evidence is lacking, and we will probably never have a definitive solution to this question".

Whatever the answer, as far as I'm concerned, this is what I'm inclined to believe, and I say that advisedly - back in 1932, in good 'ole Baltimore, USA, Mary E Frye started the ball rolling. Somewhere along the way, someone picked it up, polished it and turned it into a bright, shiny diamond. So I say: **"Good on you Mary - it was your idea in the first place"**.

A 3-track CD single, TO ALL MY LOVED ONES sung by Michael Cormick
is currently on release on VILLAGE GREEN RECORDS
www.toallmylovedones.com