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A Day in the Life

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A Day in the Life

"Trifles make the sum of human things."
—George Eliot, *Middlemarch*

The subjects of our SPHEX papers have often been figures with public visibility or significance. They have explored continents, married kings, written novels, invented stoves, created or transformed professions, led armies and nations and hospitals, made it big as rock 'n' roll stars. The focus of my paper tonight is different: it is about a private rather than a public life, and about the most private record of that private life, a diary. I am going to talk about twenty years worth of diaries written by Mary Frances Williams, an art historian who lived in Lynchburg during the second half of the twentieth century.

Full disclosure: Mary Williams was my professor when I was an undergraduate at Randolph-Macon Woman's College; when I came back to teach, we were, for two years, colleagues. More full disclosure: I had settled on the subject of this paper long before the college's art collection became controversial, and long before last December, when Louis Menand's article "Woke Up This Morning: Why Do We Read Diaries?" appeared in *The New Yorker*.[1]

Before answering the question posed by that title—Why do we read diaries?—Menand offers three useful theories to explain why people keep diaries. He names the theories according to the Freudian triumvirate: ego, id, and superego.

"The ego theory"—I'm quoting Menand here—"holds that maintaining a diary demands a level of vanity and self-importance....It obliges you to believe that the stuff that happened to you is worth writing down because it happened *to you*" (106). When those of us who are diary-keepers tell ourselves that we are recording things about ourselves and our experiences that we wish to remember, that we may want to re-read someday, or that we may want our children or grandchildren to read, we are affirming our own importance in the world in a "Kilroy-was-here" sort of way. Unfortunately, as Menand points out, this reason for diary-keeping often "means something worse than being insufferable to others; it means being insufferable to yourself" (106).

Menand's second theory, the id theory, is "that people use diaries to record wishes and desires that they need to keep secret, and to list failures and disappointments that they cannot admit publicly have given them pain" (106). This theory applies to the sort of diary that we hope no one will ever read, or that we hope no one will read until so long after we and everyone who ever knew us are gone that we will no longer be mortified by what we have written (though perhaps the dead, being mortified, can also be embarrassed). The id theory might also apply to the diary that is an exploration of feelings, the therapeutic diary that helps us to discover what we feel and how strongly and deeply we feel it, the diary that helps us to manage and work through difficult feelings so that they do not paralyze us.

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[1] 10 Dec. 2007, 106-112.

As for the superego theory, Menand explains that in this way of thinking about diaries, they "are really written for the eyes of others. They are exercises in self-justification…." If our diary-keeping is dominated by the superego theory, then, according to Menand, we "have in mind a wise and benevolent reader who will someday see that we played, on the whole, and despite the best efforts of selfish and unworthy colleagues and relations, a creditable game with the hand we were dealt" (106). In other words, from this diary it will be crystal clear to you, dear reader of the future, that I did my best in spite of my cruel parents, sadistic boss, indolent co-workers, unworthy suitors, impossible spouse, and ungrateful children; surely I am more to be pitied than censured.

After offering these three theories, Menand observes that while most people do not like to write diaries, many of us do like to read them. And while it might seem that we like to read them to find out what the diarist was like as a person, that, according to Menand, is not the real reason. What we really like is the diarist's descriptions of other people, especially people we know. To illustrate this point, Menand quotes Virginia Woolf's descriptions of T.S. Eliot, Edith Sitwell, and Dr. Freud himself, noting in passing that Woolf often wrote in her diary just "to keep the instrument in tune" (107). So the real reason we read and enjoy diaries, according to Menand, is our interest not in the diarist, but in the lives of those about whom the diarist writes.

After Menand's essay appeared, a Canadian historian named Robert Malcolmson wrote *The New Yorker* to add to Menand's ego, id, and superego theories a fourth reason that people have written diaries: "because they were lonely, or in some way disconnected from others." This feeling of being "separated from others" and the—obviously—related desire for "companionship" was, Malcolmson wrote, "especially pronounced among women in the early and mid-twentieth century." The most famous example of this sort of diary is that of Anne Frank, which, like so many others of the type Malcolmson had in mind, was written during wartime.[2]

So how well might Menand's and Malcolmson's ideas apply to the diaries of Mary Frances Williams?

Before I address that question, I want to explain how I came by these diaries in the first place. When Mary Williams learned that I had taken on the task of writing a history of R-MWC between 1950 and 1993, she understood immediately that I would be able to use what she had written between 1953 and 1973, the years she was on the faculty. She also knew what I did not yet realize: that I could be the person she needed to give her diaries a life beyond her own. So she invited me to come to her house and get six red-leather-bound datebooks, fourteen mottled black and white composition books, and two or three miscellaneous volumes—approximately 3,500 pages in all.

Why did Mary fill up all these pages? Let's take a look.

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[2] 4 Feb. 2008, 5.

Ego

First, the ego theory: that people who keep diaries out do so out of vanity; they believe the tedious trivialities of their lives are worth recording. In this context we might recall a stanza from the Beatles song that I expect you have already identified as the source of my title:

> Woke up, fell out of bed
> Dragged a comb across my head
> Found my way downstairs and drank a cup
> And looking up I noticed I was late
> Found my coat and grabbed my hat
> Made the bus in seconds flat....

Here is the Mary Williams version, in the entry for 26 April 1958:

> Morning of my 53rd birthday and I awake to a radiant outdoors—the apple tree and dogwoods (both the pink & the white) gleaming, pansies and primroses burgeoning—but to a slightly tense inside. Too much to do. —wash Mother's hair & set table for dinner party for me. Arrange flowers & check arrangements for opening of senior exhibitions this afternoon. Believe I shall wear a white palm beach suit. Check Art Gallery especially its outdoor bulletin board and all arrangements for tomorrow's opening of the Eliz. Nott. Day exhibition. Round up last advisee & get all registration cards in for next year's classes. Check on arrangements for Unitarians to entertain 7-10 adults & 5 children from the Danville Fellowship as luncheon guests Sunday. And get reserve list of books ready for librarians for Art 102 now at the Impressionists. And mow the front lawn before....no, there's no time...yes, after I have fetched Frances [Diuguid] here to cook dinner, I can mow the lawn. Sounds as if life were too busy to think. Sometimes it is, but I have done thinking this year.

Mary wrote plenty of entries like this one, many of them even longer and more detailed—what Menand describes as "the memorializing of the mundane" (108). I admit that these are the diary passages I am most inclined to skip. At the same time, I realize that such entries reveal the intensity and complexity of an extraordinary life, the life of an academic woman who in her job took sole responsibility for tasks that, after she retired, were divided among several other people. And even in the "woke up, fell out of bed" entries, there are surprises, for example, this one from 1972: "My list of things to do has gone out of a little notebook for my purse onto a legal size yellow sheet headed 'Deadlines.' The following are met...4/17 Assemble American Painting slides for Dr. Q's Specs club talk" (15 Apr 72).

In many of these "day in the life" entries, we see Mary's mastery of what the more literary among us recognize as zeugma, the witty and telling juxtaposition of incongruities. Here are some examples: "Washed my hair. Tried to get ink spots out of dress" (23 Apr 53); "Evening defrosting refrigerator and preparing lecture on Watteau" (25 Apr 54); "In morning got outline of Japanese sculpture typed and made candied grapefruit peel" (30 Dec 57). From my vantage point, these juxtapositions of "trivialities" go well beyond tedious egotism to illustrate the demands and tensions of a working woman's daily life. Perhaps you saw in Sunday's *News and Advance* a review of *Water Cooler Diaries*, a collection of full-day

accounts, written by women, of their on-the-job experiences.[3] Many of Mary's diary entries would fit right into this book, as would the experiences of her faculty and staff colleagues. When five such women gathered for dinner one night, Mary wrote that their "serious talk was of tension. One gets a lump in her throat. One aches in her muscles. It was good to sit in the dusk on the back porch and relax" (6 June 55). As that comment suggests, Mary was interested not only in her own life, but also in the lives of other women. She recorded what they wore, what they ate, what they talked about. Her documentation of others' lives, as well as of her own thoughts, feelings, and experiences, has the potential to contribute a good deal to our understanding of twentieth-century American professional women.

But we were talking about the ego theory of diary writing. Even when ego seems to account for Mary Williams's diary entries, there is almost always something else going on. For example, five pages into a seven-page entry about leaving her summer cottage in Harpswell, Maine—an entry that includes such trivialities as going to the dump, paying the man who mows the lawn, and cutting her toenails—Mary says, "I write this because I want to remember it and because I want you to know" (1 Sept 68). We will come back later to who that "you" might be.

Id, Loneliness

If the ego theory accounts for much of what Mary wrote in her diaries, the id theory accounts for even more. Mary's father, a faculty member at Brown University, died at 39, when she was only seven years old. Her sense of his absence stayed keen all her life. Once, at Christmastime, she thought she saw his face in a mirror:

> I quite unconsciously called up his spirit, not knowing what I was doing as I looked around for a likely place on which to drape several left-over strands of ground pine. I simply wreathed them around my great grandmother's (Joanna Reynolds) mirror that hangs in the hall....Suddenly the curly fronds surrounding the glass became my father's beard. The glint of my own dark brown eyes in the glass was his, too. I must have loved to feel his beard, because this pine-encircled mirror has given me extreme pleasure all the holidays. (27 Dec 57)

The death of Mary's father left her mother a faculty widow with two young children, "always on the fringe of society" (12 Apr 72, 2-3 Apr 73). When the children reached adulthood, mother and daughter spent most summers together at their cottage in Harpswell, and for the last ten years of Mrs. Williams's life, she lived with Mary in Lynchburg. There were many such mother-daughter pairs among Mary's acquaintances, so many that she once wrote an essay called "Our Mothers" (Vol. I; see also 28 Mar 55). Here again, the well-documented experience of one woman illuminates the experiences of the many other women to whom falls the primary responsibility of caring for their parents.

The emotional strain of living with her mother is evident in Mary's diaries. She cheated at cards to let her mother win (4 July 53). She gritted her teeth when she felt she was being treated like a child, "control[ling] my irritation when [Mother] innocently asks 'Do we have enough gas?' or goes out on the back porch [at Harpswell] to watch me swim. I'm sure it's only mild curiosity and habit on her part," Mary continued, "but I loathe being watched as

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[3] "Women in the Workplace," *News and Advance*, 13 April 2008, E2, E6.

when a child, lest I drown" (24 Aug 53). She considered asking her mother "not to examine the return addresses on my letters[.] It is late to make this request, as she has always done it out of innocent curiosity. I hate it. It is an invasion of my privacy" (1 Sept 56). Mary believed it was "abnormal... for mother and daughter to be one another's chief companion in life" (20 Aug 53). She was devoted to her mother, but her ambivalence about their situation was deep: "If I tend to a drive for Mother first, then I resent my own concerns pushed aside—college, church, personal friends. If I tend to what I prefer first, then I suffer guilt from having given Mother only left over time" (7 Sept 57; see also 10 Sept 53).

As long as her mother was alive, Mary felt she was living "a double life almost all the time. One is the dream-life, or what I would like to have and be. The other is the reality which I tolerate" (11 Aug 56). That "dream-life, ...what I would like to have and be," was Mary's desire to marry, the topic that recurs most often in all the twenty years of these diaries and that makes Menand's id theory fit them so well. Mary herself connected this unfulfilled desire to the loss of her father: "For literally years during childhood my wish, my secret wish, when throwing a white-ringed pebble into the sea or blowing out birthday candles was 'Let father come alive again.' Is my present wish equally futile, I wonder? 'May I share a man's life' or 'Let me recognize my man'" (10 Apr 54). As she moved through the middle of her life, the years between 48 and 68, she wrote over and over about her longing for physical and emotional intimacy, about her loneliness and her need for companionship. She mused on past love affairs and considered future marriage prospects. Thus in Mary Williams's case, Menand's id theory merges with Malcolmson's idea that people who keep diaries, and especially women who keep diaries, do so out of loneliness. Here are two passages expressing both Mary's loneliness and her desire to marry: "I miss the coziness of an animal's nearness. Why, the poorest and lowliest lie cuddled together with more than a dream" (30 Dec 57); and, after a dinner party, "Dear husband or lover – I miss you, especially now when we should be discussing our dinner with the brutal frankness of marriage" (10 June 53).

Several years after writing that last entry, Mary set her sights on a divorced male friend, but "he went and married before I could get to him in a decent interval.... Now it is rather peaceful not to have all that difficult planning to do, that world of private hoping to influence my decisions. Now there's just myself and, for a time, Mother. And now I must build a home for myself" (6 Sept 56). She soon found that home, on Westmoreland Street near the college (11 Nov 56, 11 Mar 57), and threw herself into housekeeping. She scrubbed, repaired, painted, sewed, worked in the garden, and entertained her many friends, all the while also teaching, writing, giving talks, and playing leadership roles at church and in several organizations. "I am enjoying life more now that I am not dreaming of how to find a husband," she wrote; "[d]ay after day now I am filled with happiness" (13 and 21 Sept 56). On New Year's Day in 1967, she wrote that 1966 had been "the year when I gave up expectation of marriage and asked Vicky to come share my home with me in our old age" (1 Jan 67; see also 23 Jan 68). Vicky was her old friend Dorothy Vickery, whom she had known since the mid 1930s, when they both worked at Hollins.

Mary may have given up the realistic expectation of marriage, but the dream of it never died. When she learned of the engagement of two friends her own age, she was envious "from the bottom of my heart. With hands and lips I envy them. From the hair on my head to the toes on my feet I envy them" (19 Oct 69). And when she went to the Phi Beta Kappa Triennial Council in Indianapolis in 1970, she wrote, "I had exactly the same hope that I

have had going to any large meeting anywhere, all my life, that the lightning of love at first sight might strike. It did not. It never has. Yet as I breathe my last breath, I shall still believe it possible" (5 Sept 1970). "I feel that I have missed what I was designed for," she told Vicky after observing faculty wives at a memorial service in Lee Chapel in Lexington. Vicky "reassured me, or tried to, with a remark about my intellectual contribution. That does not console me" (16 Oct 70). The summer before she retired, Mary made one last try in her "lifelong search for a husband. I reviewed the remaining possibilities one by one," she wrote, and then, after eliminating each, she continued, "I can do no more. Thus it happened that in the summer of 1972 in my sixty-seventh year I was for the first time in all those years free. The search was over. I had really tried. Therefore I stopped feeling guilty. I lived in the present. It was good" (11 Oct 72).

These entries, and many more, indicate that at least in the case of Mary Williams, the id theory, along with the idea that women write diaries out of loneliness, goes a long way toward accounting for the diarist's motivation.

Superego

As for the superego theory—the view that diaries are documents of self-justification—that motive also drove some of what Mary Williams put in her diaries. The most prominent illustration of the superego theory involves a colleague, the "Spanish refugee" painter Pierre Daura (3 Dec 71), who was already on the R-MWC faculty when Mary came to the college as full professor with an appointment as chair of the art department. At the end of Mary's first year, in 1953, Daura resigned. Here is just one of the self-justifying entries on that subject.

> I am sad, because Mr. Daura has resigned. It is hard for me to see myself as impossible to get on with. I have done a lot to give him recognition, which his ego needs, and tried hard. He has told the president that he must be first. I believe it. And I admire anyone who resigns as soon as he realizes he cannot cooperate with his boss. We all dread what the devoted townsfolk will say if he assumes the martyr's air. (26 May 53)

Daura's resignation came at the beginning of Mary Williams's career at R-MWC. Near the end of that career is another instance of self-justification, this one involving a coveted award for distinguished teaching. After winning the award, Mary admitted that she had long wanted some public proof that she was worthy of academic recognition. "[T]he urge to vindicate myself goes far back" she wrote. "After all, I did join the Red Cross because my contract at Mount Holyoke was not renewed. Middlebury College asked me to resign as dean.... Yesterday I asked Randolph-Macon's Information Services to send my good news to South Hadley and Middlebury." And she went on to list the dozen friends to whom she sent clippings about the honor she had received (11 Sept 71).

I have been talking about how well Menand's theories about the reasons people keep diaries apply to Mary Williams's diaries, and my conclusion is that the theories apply very well, though in this case, no single motivation dominates. But the Freudian triumvirate does not tell the whole story of why Mary Williams kept her diary, or why other diarists feel compelled to write regularly about their days.

Metadiscourse

Mary wrote often about her reasons for writing—at least, about the reasons of which she was conscious. As someone more theoretical than I might put it, her diaries contain a great deal of metadiscourse—a lot of writing about writing.

One reason Mary wrote was that she had the habit. She was, to use her words, "a person who has always scribbled" (18 Nov 62). She began keeping her diary when she was twelve, and she kept it until she was in her nineties. She wrote because she had to write, in the same way that some people run because they have to run, or pray because they have to pray. Once, when her diary was lost for two weeks, she "felt like a painter who is prevented from painting. Or like a wife without her other half. This outlet makes me whole again" (15 Dec 68).

Another reason Mary wrote was that for about three years she thought she might undertake an academic novel with a man like her father as protagonist; during this period the diary became a place to collect material. For a while she was quite excited about this project, but eventually she abandoned it because "the academic life that I thought was the only good and worthwhile way of life is now somehow discredited since 1968 and here at Randolph-Macon since 1970." After this reflection on the enormous upheaval in all of academe that took place at the end of the 1960s, she made a more practical point: "the novel is too lengthy an undertaking at the age of nearly 67" (28 Dec 71). She may also have realized that while she could readily describe settings and draw characters, she would have a much harder time inventing a plot—though goodness knows that there is in academe intrigue enough for plots aplenty, as academic satirists and mystery writers have proven again and again.

Yet another reason Mary gave for writing her diary, a reason she mentioned repeatedly both before and after the period when she thought she might write a novel, was that she wanted to leave a record for someone else to use—an archivist or historian, or alumnae of Randolph-Macon who might want to know what the college was like during her years there. Related to this reason was another: she wanted immortality. She wanted to live on in the work of someone else, someone who would draw on what she had written and who would quote her, and, in that way, bring her back to life after she was gone. Of course, the diary was not the only vehicle she had for immortality.[4] Still, she wanted to leave behind more of herself than her scholarly work, more, even, than her strengthening of the art collection and the power of seeing that her students took away from her classes. Perhaps the desire to leave something behind—to mark, at least for a time, one's presence in this world—is an instance of ego, of vanity, but if so, it is vanity that most of us can understand and forgive.

In any case, when Mary gave her own reasons for writing her diary, she always imagined a reader in addition to herself, and her "you" was most often either a future historian or the alumnae of R-MWC. When I have misgivings about "using" Mary's diaries or about

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[4] Her catalog of the R-MWC collection of American painting was, in her words, "likely to satisfy me as my one creation" (1 Jan 65). In addition to book reviews and academic papers, she also wrote a history of Lynchburg's Unitarian congregation and a historical article about a marine biological station in Harpswell ("The Harpswell Laboratory, 1898-1920: A Marine Biological Station," *Maine Historical Society Quarterly* 27:2 [1987]: 82-99).

invading her privacy, I remember that she herself put the notebooks into my hands. She knew her diaries would go into an archive where eventually others could read what she had written. Yes, she was tempted at times to blacken out names, though I urged her not to do it, and she did cut out a line in one of the notebooks I've seen. And yes, she sometimes did write about someone, or some situation, without naming the people involved, though it is usually possible to figure out what was going on. But she was enough of a historian to know that diaries like hers have uses far beyond what the writer herself can anticipate—as when I asserted that the so-called "egotism" of Mary's "day in the life" entries might contribute to the social history of American women.

I have been talking about why people write diaries, and in particular why Mary Williams wrote her diaries. I also want to spend a little time on Menand's explanation of why we like to read diaries. Remember, he claims that we like to read what the diarist has to say about people we know. This claim most certainly applies to the diaries of Mary Williams. They offer all the pleasures and none of the frustrations of a *roman à clef.* Mary names names, and she names places, streets we have walked, buildings in which we ourselves have spent time. Pierre Daura is Pierre Daura. Bill Quillian is Bill Quillian. North Princeton Circle appears as itself. So do Pearson's Drug Store, the Fine Arts Center, the Williams Home (31 May 53), the new synagogue (10 Nov 57), the Woman's Club (27 Feb 53, 22 Jan 72), and the Unitarian Church. In Mary's diary the Sweet Briar boxwoods are already as "impressive" as we know them still to be (8 Mar 58), though, sadly, the same cannot be said for LC's College Lake, which she describes swept clean for ice-skating after a snowfall (16 Feb 58).

The Lives of Others

Enjoy, then, with me, some of Mary's descriptions of people, some of whom we know or remember, and all of whom spring to life under Mary's pen, whether we know them or not.

Dr. Quillian is "wise" (12 Dec 57); he is "our democratic man" (11 June 63), "an energetic president" (21 June 64). ***Mrs. Quillian*** is "so warm, so excellent a manager" (27 Sept 56). She is "spontaneous and delightful.... the ideal president's wife. And naturally so, not by trying to be" (28 Sept 57); she is "efficient and natural" (24 Jan 72).

Then there are "the two little ***Miss Davidsons***," Miss Grace and Miss Mabel, "charming as a pair of birds, solicitous with food and stories" (10 June 53). "They are a country minister's maiden daughters. Miss Grace worked at the Public Health Office. Miss Mabel taught English at Randolph-Macon....Both have been retired for some years" (11 Jan 63) Every year at Commencement they get a Smithfield ham and a pound cake; "[w]ith those two in the house, no returning classmate or former student presents any problem" (10 June 53). From their mother they inherited an amethyst ring "which both of them covet. They wear it alternatively, a week at a time. Who[ever] wears it has grace to say at meals. The other, meanwhile, wears a topaz ring" (18 Sept 53). As the years pass, Miss Grace and Miss Mabel

> try to keep up the rites of friendship in spite of their limitations of strength and income....The trouble with Miss Mabel and Miss Grace is that one is never out of debt to them. If you return a dinner invitation by taking them out to the Sunday buffet dinner at the hotel at Natural Bridge and then feel fine at having given them that pleasure and done your duty, they invite you to dinner next week ("either Tues. Wed or Fri, whichever day you are free") and you are right back under obligation to

> them once more. Besides, their helpings are vast and their Sally Lunn is so hot and good that you eat more than you really want to and feel stuffed and ungrateful.

After several more examples of the Miss Davidsons' burdensome attentions, Mary wrote, tenderly, "They love to over-extend themselves for sweet friendship's sake" (11 Jan 63).

Here is someone else we know:

> A small compensation for being sick was having ***Dr. George Craddock*** visit me. I had never expected he would take on a new patient, but it was the other man's weekend off, so, to my great satisfaction, Dr. Craddock was to come to fix me up. Lynchburg adores him and calls him the most unkempt and lovable physician there is. It's true. He sits close to one, with his hand and knees and head hunched over the edge of the bed. [And says] "Tell me all about it." His hair is so tousled that one's impulse is to smile at him and to feel superior. On looking down my throat he uttered a slow shrill squeal. What a wonderful doctor. (11 March 56)

And here are some more brief comments about people:

"Best remark of the evening came from ***Miss [Roberta] Cornelius*** when we had been making fun of beauty contests. She said 'If I had the beauty, I wouldn't mind the contest'" (20 May 58).

Carl Stern is "changeable like the weather, gentle or grouchy or humorous" (13 May 64).

"***Russell Ball*** is one of the warmest, sanest, most perceptive, best organized, most intelligent men I know" (13 May 64).

Helen Owen Calvert is "so warm, pretty, and effective…" (13 May 64).

President Jack is "a southern smoothie" (6 Aug 63), ***Edith Whiteman*** is greatly to be admired for her wisdom (1 Oct 72), and "***Rabbi Fischoff***s erudition has changed Lynchburg" (28 Jan. 67).

People and places come together in this entry from 1964:

> The ride home together in Dr. Quillian's car [after a meeting at Sweet Briar about tri-college collaboration] was very gay, even hilarious. He asked Harriet [Hudson] and me if we had been asked yet to be Francis Bacon in Miss Roberta Cornelius' forthcoming all-female production of a Shakespearean skit she has written. Three women separately told Dr. Q. that they had been asked, but refused to be Francis Bacon. Ed Penick made the comment that it was rash enough to be Shakespeare but rasher to be Bacon. Ken [Morland] said, "now I see why religion is in a decline." As we came over the hill and saw the lights of Lynchburg someone said "I'm thankful the Hotel Virginian sign is working all right tonight," but nobody mentioned exactly why. But I knew. When it is out of order it says HOT VIRGIN. Then we smelled the horrid fumes of the Mead factory. "That paper smells," someone said. "But just wait til it's printed," Dr. Quillian said. At dinner we had talked a good deal about the Lynchburg press and both the other presidents had told Dr. [Carey] Brewer [new at

> LC] that he could not fail to have a front page headline appearance before long. (22 May 64)

Local people, places, and attitudes are also reflected in this account of a 1967 City Council meeting:

> People began to leave when the report on air pollution was tabled as Helen Calvert, Mary Brazeale, and Ruth Ball (obviously from the League of Women Voters) smiled at one another as if to say "Just what the City Council could be expected to do." I stayed to the end of the public part… and concluded that the public would be more interested if (1) the speakers addressing the council could be heard by those in the rear and if (2) the Mayor would clarify the rapid mumble of a roll call by saying afterwards, "The motion has been carried." (16 Dec 67)

After a subsequent meeting, Mary "approach[ed] the mayor in the hall and ask[ed] him if he could announce afterwards that a motion carried or did not. He said that this had never been done and 'One can't change things too much, you know'" (15 Feb 68).

An outsider

Part of what makes Mary's writing about people and places so interesting is that she views Lynchburg from an outsider's vantage point. She was not a Baptist or an Episcopalian; she was a Unitarian. And even though she lived in Lynchburg for half a century and loved her home here, in many of her views she remained very much the New Englander who kept in a box in her attic a china figurine that was "one of her [great] uncle's Yankee trophies from a Georgia home. We shall say nothing about it in the South" (7 July 58).

The most amusing of Mary's entries about Virginia's pride in itself involved a meeting of the State Art Commission, on which she served for fourteen years. This particular meeting

> was highly entertaining because of the submission of two portraits of foxhounds, one a real champion, "White Ella," and the other a Composite Hound. Both were made to be the official portrait of the dog of the Commonwealth of Virginia. The Composite Fox Hound is sponsored by the Fox Hunters Association but we are trying to get the artist, a Mr. Fawcett, to push back the Virginia landscape which now appears to be glued to the far side of the dog, although the painter has already at our request toned down an orange tree or two. As for the pastel-colored portrait of White Ella painted by a lady, June Hunger, the lengthy presentation of the champion's record as hunter and mother was accomplished before a room full of visitors without any use whatsoever of the word "bitch." Entirely without approval of any kind is the line drawing of a fox hound which has been printed on a state guide to Virginia. He is known as the De Facto Fox Hound. (8 Sept 68)

Mary is never more the outsider than when she writes about Virginia's racial arrangements, which of course changed dramatically during the decades these diaries cover. With more time we could look closely at passages that deal in vivid detail with subjects ranging from Mary's discovery that African Americans could not take books out of Jones Memorial Library (27 March 53) and her involvement in the establishment of a truly public library, to

her observations about the behavior of African Americans and whites in train stations and on buses (3 Sept 57), to her attendance at a meeting of the Links for a discussion of open housing (24 March 68), to her new self-consciousness about describing skin tones in paintings and her realization of "how white our culture has been all these centuries" (1 Apr 69).

A gifted writer

But for all this, the main reason I like to read Mary Williams's diaries is that she was an excellent writer. She enjoyed the challenge of writing with "brevity plus clarity plus completeness" (11 Feb 59), and she was excited by "that experience with eyes and tongue, forms seen and words found" (16 Jan 68). Her powers of visual description were extraordinary, a result, no doubt, of her art historian's trained eye. She saw everything, but she knew how to select only the most telling details and the most precise sensory language. In her private writing, as in her teaching, she could make another person see. Here are a few short examples:

After a six-mile hike in the mountains: "Walking, it is impressive to see the giant fallen trees returning to earth. One had fractured into thousands of tiny cubes of wood that I could separate with my fingers. Another had become a path of moist red brown powder. All around, the peaceful process went on in the relaxed and willing wood" (22 March 53).

"Last night was the night that I woke up worrying about Unitarian affairs, & finally opened my eyes on a brilliant night. A golden planet was shining close. The air was tingling. In the vast universe I was small and alone but contented with such beauty. I turned end for end in bed to get my face closer to the window and fell asleep happy" (18 Sept 56).

"8:30 a.m. Have just now sprayed my new grass, thin as rays of green light. Standing under the wren house looking for the scolding wren, I saw up in the deodar tree the mourning dove sitting peaceably on her rather exposed bunch of twigs, illuminated by the morning sun. Would all people be more wholesome if they had some daily contact with the earth? Not pavements, but the mystery of seeds, sun, and water" (19 May 64).

This next one was written when she was on sabbatical, in Harpswell, in the kitchen, after many days of stripping, washing, sealing, and painting wood to protect it from Maine's brutal weather. "Yesterday and today have been Mount Washington days, when the whole Presidential range cut the sky like a blue blade. I am where I want most to be. Right here" (12 Sept 67).

To my mind, these passages, and countless others, demonstrate much more than the quality of Mary's intelligence and the acuity of her trained eye; the passages demonstrate, as well, her intense pleasure in the "trifles" that "make the sum of human things," and the capacity for joy and wonder that never left her, even though she did not get what she wanted most in life.

* * * * *

18 March 1995 I've just come from an hour-long visit with Mary Williams at Westminster Canterbury. She'd called yesterday to say she wanted me to come and get [the rest of] her diaries.... She was waiting for

me at the front door so she could show me where to get a cart to carry the packages down; then we went up to her room and loaded 10 sealed and tied bundles, carefully numbered, before we sat down to talk….I'd told her about how I'd used her record in the talk I'd given most recently and how her diaries were a major source for the [R-MWC] history, and how I'd been thinking about how to make a book of her diaries. She as usual couldn't quite see their value, and I as usual explained that there is now great interest in women's lives, that she had lived across an enormous transition in female experiences and that her work had value because of that. As usual she expressed regret that so much of her diaries was given over to her desire to marry, when she'd also had many other interesting experiences; she had travelled, she had done other things. But often what she wrote about was something she was never to have. And I as usual said I thought there was value [in her writing] for others who might be trying to understand how to make a good life despite not having got their heart's desire. She looked skeptical, but I think she finally understood me. She told me that her dear friend Dorothy Vickery is near the end and so closed off and miserable that Mary wishes she would die. She said, when I asked about her health, that she believes she [herself] is near the end, that nothing is working very well, that she now has sight in only one eye. She likes the idea of some part of herself going on after she's gone…. Did I tell you, she asked, that I realized lately what the happiest moment of my life has been? No, you didn't tell me, I said. It was one day at Randolph-Macon, just before class started. I was in the [classroom]…. and the student who was to show the slides was ready at the back of the room, and I was at the front with all my papers laid out in front of me, and all the students were there, and we were waiting for the bell to ring. That was my happiest moment. I really did love Randolph-Macon….As we talked, I could hear the ticking of her bedside clock and the swing of the pendulum in the beautiful handmade Maine grandfather clock behind me. Are you still keeping your diary, I asked her. Oh no, she said. Then: it's very feeble. She went over to her bedside table and drew out one of those same speckled composition books and opened it to show me. The entries were just a few lines each, the spelling uncertain, but the determination to write [seemed] as strong as ever. There in the entry for yesterday was my own name, every part of it misspelled [,] because I would be coming the next day to get the diaries. She will never recover the sight in her right eye, and she had recorded that, and Vicky's misery. She seemed pleased when I told her that I would write in my diary about coming to see her. What she seems to want now, at the end of her life, is the assurance that something of her will go on, and she sees me as the way, or one of the ways, that will happen….When I asked her how she felt about giving up her diaries, she said she was so relieved and so glad, and I believed her. Then our visit was over. She saw the cart and me downstairs, and helped load the packages into the car. Now there are 10 packages, she reminded me. The big bell was chiming the hour of 10 as we kissed goodbye.

So there you have it: a day in my life that intersected with a day in the life of Mary Williams. Perhaps you will agree that, at least in Mary's case, Louis Menand was wrong when he said that we don't read diaries to know more about the person who wrote them. In all her complexity, Mary Williams was a person well worth knowing, as we all might seem to be if we kept diaries as splendid as hers. I do want something of Mary to go on, and I like to think that tonight, for a little while, in defiance of ticking clocks and tolling bells, she is alive again because of the words she put down on paper. I want to close with just a few more of those words: "When I get home at night in my car alone about ten o'clock and find the house lighted, I am glad Vicky is there and I am alive. Then I look up at the stars. Last night they were very bright. I stand still with doorkey in hand and take a good long look, to remember them forever. When I am dust and can't see, I shall miss the stars most" (18 Feb 71).

MFW Timeline

1905 April 26 born Providence, RI, in a house at 89 Brown St that later became part of the Brown campus. Parents had been married just a little over a year.
1912 father dies after an accident in an elevator at the medical school where he taught, accident followed by a "futile operation."
1913 the year Mrs. Williams buys the cottage in Harpswell? The family had slept in a tent there before Mr. W died. Until then, the cottage was rented annually from about 1896 when the Merrills built it (23 July 70)
1914 or 1915 enrolls in Shady Hill school (its first year)
1917 begins keeping her diary. She is 12 years old.
Goes to Radcliffe
1927-28 Carnegie fellowship (resident)
1928-29 Carnegie fellowship (travelling)
1931 dissertation on contemporary German architecture
1930-36 fine arts tutor, Radcliffe
1936-39 instructor, asst prof, Hollins
1939-43 asst prof, Mt Holyoke
1943-47 personnel interviewer, Red Cross
1947-49 dean of women, Middlebury
1949-52 faculty, State Teachers College, St. Cloud, Minn
1952-73, 1976-77 professor of art, R-MWC
1952-56 shares apartment at 2924 Rivermont (next to the Cavalier?) with MV Kagey; Mother, a Brown grad, visits about 2x/yr before moving in permanently
1957 moves w/her mother to 239 Westmoreland
1964 MFW's mother dies
1965 catalog of R-MWC art collection
1965 travels around the world
1966 starts piano lessons at 61
1967-68 sabbatical
1969 late September Dorothy Vickery moves in with MFW
1970 last year on the Virginia Art Commission, on which she has served for 14 years
1971 Gillie Larew award for distinguished teaching
1973 retirement from R-MWC
1973 part-time at SBC
1976-77 second semester at R-MWC
1977 second edition of catalog, R-MWC art collection
1987 publishes "The Harpswell Laboratory, 1898-1920: A Marine Biological Station" in the *Maine Historical Society Quarterly*
1992 gives 20 years of diaries to R-MWC, c/o CWB
1995 Jan or Feb moves to Westminster Canterbury
1995 March gives rest of diaries to R-MWC, c/o CWB
1995 Dorothy Vickery dies at Westminster Canterbury
2003 Sept 22 MFW dies at Westminster Canterbury, Lynchburg, VA