

Katharine of Bryn Mawr

by Christina Alex

Main Line Life

Back then, she wasn't the Kate everyone knows. The aura of Katharine Houghton Hepburn, the four-time Academy Award-winning actress – strong will, feisty repartee, intellectual elegance – and Bryn Mawr College's most famous alumna were merely developing during her years there, 1924-28.

But through the years, Hepburn has maintained that the Main Line experience was essential to her later self; and that taking the girl out of Bryn Mawr never meant taking the Bryn Mawr out of the girl.

Kate didn't exactly breeze through college, defying difficult exam questions with her Connecticut Yankee chin thrust in the air. "I was a sort of bore. Everybody thinks I was fascinating; I was not terribly fascinating at all. I was terrified, pathetic and rather dumb. My mother came here and was a brilliant student, that type of woman who really amounts to something, and I came here and..."

Kate said this is 1977, when she received the college's highest honor, the M. Carey Thomas Award, for American women of outstanding achievement.

She'd been reading about Thomas' portrayal of the "airy mind."

"That's what mine was. I couldn't study; I was floating through the air. I didn't do very well. It was terribly tough for me to get in. I kept flunking things, but then I just eked by and I got in, and I did rather badly."

She heeded the words of her mother's mother, who said on her deathbed at 34: "Get an education. Get the best. Go to Bryn Mawr."

Her mother was fascinated by Thomas, Bryn Mawr's president when she graduated with the class of 1899. Thomas lived at the Deanery when Kate matriculated.

Thomas' "you can do it" philosophy became hers – "she taught it to me," Kate told students when she spoke at the college's centennial in 1985.

That motto carried her through some dark times, which began almost immediately when she enrolled at 17. She told students in 1973 she had wanted to study medicine, but "was really absolutely absent in the head in chemistry." She also had to repeat Latin.

She learned how to think and plan. Recalling Samuel Arthur King, who taught speech and Greek, she said, "I learned here to speak out loud with a certain amount of confidence. " King also supervised some of her plays and was an "enormous" help.

Kate said occasionally that Helen Taft Manning, then Bryn Mawr's dean, suggested she might do better elsewhere after she missed 10 days in the beginning of sophomore year because of an appendix operation and her marks sank. "But she decided to keep me, so I worked like mad...I never did anything but study. I hid in the library after hours and swam in that silly pool because I used to sit there all night long, studying!"

(In 1985, she responded to rumors that she swam naked in the Cloister pool. "It was an act of the greatest virtue. And a fact that I had no bathing suit.")

Though her flaming red hair and the granite cheekbones stopped traffic miles away, in her freshman year she thought of herself as anything but beautiful. In 1927, Kate was chosen but did not join 34 May Queen contenders in the "great college beauty parade." According to the Dec. 7 *College News*, candidates "had to march two by two up

and down the throng, catching phrases about their walk, their hair, and how they would look on a horse. Then they joined hands and skipped out of the room.”

Hepburn would’ve been the second redhead, according to the article’s tally on tresses.

Speaking of virtue, in a 1973 talk with seniors, Kate looked at the Haverford boys in the room and asked if they lived nearby. “I was a Catholic monk in those days.”

But she wasn’t exactly an angel. She told students in 1973 that she got suspended for smoking her sophomore year. “Somebody else had a pack of perfumed cigarettes. I never smoked because I was so healthy. So they gave me a cigarette and I lit it, and smoked it, and was seen and suspended for a week.”

And though reviews weren’t all four-star, the spark Kate created was undeniable.

The April 20, 1927 *College News* received *The Truth About Blayds*, by A.A. Milne, in which Kate played a young man. “As the young Oliver, Katharine Hepburn was a trifle amateurish, a bit too conscious that she was on the stage, but she made an engaging boy, roguish and merry,” wrote E. Walton, ’25.

Kate played Theresa in *The Cradle Song* by G. Martinez Sierra. “Katharine Hepburn as Theresa was so extraordinarily lovely to look at that it was difficult to form any judgment on her acting.” The *College News* review said, “Her voice had perhaps too much of a childish treble but her little movements, poses and the contrast of her gaiety with the restrained atmosphere of the convent, could not have been improved.”

Kate finished up her college acting career playing the lead Pandora in John Lyly’s 16th - century comedy, *The Woman in the Moon*, in May 1928.

She downplayed her talent: “We had some very good actors. I was not, I think, one of them,” said Kate in the 1973 talk to students.

Through sheer will, Kate pulled her grades up and graduated in 1928 with a double major – in history and philosophy.

In January 1928, an article on scattered classmates said, “Kate started a career on the stage, and now she is going to be married to an actor.”

Kate told students in 1977, “I’ll say one thing: I stayed her, and I got through, but with a terrific amount of work, a terrific amount of concentration, and I learned then what it means to work.”

That lesson prevailed, even as Kate came into a position to expect star treatment. Bryn Mawr president Mary Patterson McPherson was struck that Kate “really always does her own work.” She makes her own phone calls, writes letters, researches and writes her speeches.

“What I learned here was to do something that I found enormously difficult – enormously difficult – because I really couldn’t concentrate. I was so excited,” she said in 1977.

“But I did it, and I learned how to do it so that when I got stuck in a terrible position – it was shattering – I knew how to just go back and start again and take hold and build it up.”

Bryn Mawr archivist Loretta Treese, class of 1973, remembers then-college president (and former U.S. senator) Harris Wofford showing Kate around, bringing her to the Erdman living room where she spoke. Treese, who lived in Erdman, doesn’t remember much of the content, “but I was bowled over by her attitude, enthusiasm and incredible zest.”

Kate has maintained ties with her close Bryn Mawr friends. McPherson says, “She’s a loyal friend to people. “ One was Alice Palache Jones, with whom Kate first traveled to Europe one college summer. Palache later became trustee emeritus of the college, the vice president of Chemical Bank and Kate’s financial advisor.

McPherson accompanied Kate to Palache’s funeral.

According to reports, Kate met her husband Ogden Ludlow Smith (whom she calls “Luddy” in her autobiography) at a Bryn Mawr dance in 1927. Smith, a fledgling stockbroker from the Main Line, later dropped his surname at her insistence.

The marriage was short-lived. Still, McPherson says that they stayed friends and Kate cooked for him when he was dying of cancer.

Kate remains a loyal supporter of the college, though she is open with constructive criticism as well, says McPherson.

A scholarship in her name is given each year to a student “interested in the study of drama and motion pictures and in the cultivation of English diction and literary appreciation.”

In the early ‘80s, Kate called McPherson, wanting to visit the college archives because she was assembling material on her mother.

McPherson invited Kate to stay with her. For dinner she invited the head of the library and others who could help Kate with research.

McPherson says that Kate turns in for the night around 8 or 8:30 p.m., rises at 4 a.m., prepares breakfast in her room so as not to disturb anyone and takes an early morning walk.

McPherson visited Kate at her New York home several times to work on a project about M. Carey Thomas that never came to fruition.

She said Kate’s house in New York’s Turtle Bay is a brownstone. “Quite simple,” the way you or I would decorate our home, says McPherson.

She had some of her paintings on the walls, a hole in the rug.

Observing her from the back of the jam-packed Goodhart Hall when she accepted the M. Carey Thomas award in 1977, McPherson said, “Those cheekbones look fabulous at a distance.” She’s only 5-foot-6 or so, and McPherson says she appears larger in the movies. “She moves well – the way she holds her head and voice...”

“I’m 6 feet tall and I don’t look anything like her from afar.”

McPherson says it can be uncomfortable walking with Kate through crowds: passersby often want to lay their hands on an “icon.” She used to have her secretary present when she entered cabs in New York “to bash people out of the way.”

But she always drove herself around.

McPherson says that Kate stops and listens when people talk to her and gives thoughtful replies.

In 1985 Kate spoke for all of the alumnae at the Centennial. She was “marvelously attractive, very fresh and frank,” McPherson says.

“She has the students eating out of her hand, even if she’s telling them things that would make them throw up if I told them.”

Kate told them one thing she carried away from Bryn Mawr was the ability to draw good judgments.

“With good judgment, you can do anything. It is really a question of when to say yes, when to say no, when to say maybe, and when to say nothing,” she said.

Kate last appeared in the 1994-released *Love Affair*, a remake of *An Affair to Remember*, with Warren Beatty and Annette Bening.

She turned 89 May 12 and is recuperating from a recent illness at her home in the borough of Fenwick, Conn., according to longtime friend John Bryson. Contrary to reports, Kate didn't have a stroke or pneumonia, he says.

As usual, she defied everyone's expectations and continues to live on as the embodiment of the Bryn Mawr woman.

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