McGinley, Phyllis (1905-1978)

Phyllis McGinley, born in Ontario, Oregon, in 1905, was an award-winning poet and writer. A Pulitzer Prize winner, she was featured on the cover of *Time Magazine* in June 1965 and was one of only two poets (with Mark Van Doren) that year invited to the White House Festival of the Arts. She was the recipient of over a dozen honorary degrees and the Laetare Medal from the University of Notre Dame, and her anthologies of poetry and essays sold tens of thousands of copies.

McGinley's family moved to a Colorado farmhouse when she was two years old. She would later claim that her rural childhood in Oregon and Colorado was responsible for her writing career, since she had few options for camaraderie and resorted to reading and writing for entertainment. By the time McGinley was in college, she was writing and submitting poetry to school and local newspapers and winning awards for her poetry.

McGinley attended college at the University of Southern California before graduating from the University of Utah in 1927. Two years later, she moved to New Rochelle, New York, to teach middle school. She also sold her poetry to *The New Yorker*, where editor Katherine White encouraged her to focus on humorous verse, asking: "Why do you sing the same sad songs all lady poets sing?" In the early 1930s, McGinley moved to New York City to focus on her career as a freelance writer and poet.

In 1948, she married Charles L. Hayden, and the subject of her poetry changed with the change in her life. Before her marriage, her poetry had focused on urban American life in the 1930s and 1940s, including conditions during the Depression and World War II. After her marriage, she wrote about domestic tranquility and suburban life. Although she embraced her reputation as a domestic poet, she sometimes grew frustrated with reviewers for ignoring the rest of her work. "I'm so sick of this 'Phyllis McGinley, suburban housewife and mother of two....That's only an eighth or a tenth of my work," she said in a 1960 interview with *Newsweek*. "The rest is different. There's a hell of a lot of straight social criticism."

McGinley also wrote children's books and essays, publishing eighteen books, dozens of magazine articles, and hundreds of poems over her lifetime. *Times Three* (1960), a collection of the best poems of McGinley's thirty-year career, won the Pulitzer Prize. Poet W.H. Auden wrote the preface to all editions, pointing out the seriousness and significance of her poems.

McGinley was an advocate for the domestic life at a time when it was moving out of style. She challenged Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* by insisting in a *Time* interview that while she had "found time to become a poet of note...that this is an accident and that her role as a housewife is more satisfying." Her collection *Sixpence in Her Shoe* (1964) contains advice on how to be a housewife, including this about husbands: "Let him educate you. The whole duty of a wife is to bolster her husband's self-esteem; not his vanity but his pride. A man's ego bruises easily. It is not nourished like a woman's by the sheer biological ability to bear children." At a time when women were fighting for equal rights, some argued that McGinley's unflagging support for the homemaker's life rang false, especially given her achievements outside the home.

While McGinley lived in New York, she kept a suburban household in Larchmont, New York, where she and her husband raised two daughters. When Charles Hayden died in 1972, McGinley stopped writing almost entirely. She lived in Manhattan until her death in 1978.

Written by John Ewbank

Further Reading:

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McGinley, Phyllis. *Times Three: Selected Verse from Three Decades, with Seventy New Poems*. New York: Doubleday & Company, 1975.

Wagner, Linda Welshimer. *Phyllis McGinley.* New York: Twayne Publishers, 1971.

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