

A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK OF THE YEAR

MARY McCARTHY



INTELLECTUAL MEMOIRS NEW YORK 1936-1938

FOREWORD BY
ELIZABETH HARDWICK

NOTES BY CAROL BRIGHTMAN

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A B C D E

FOREWORD

Intellectual Memoirs: New York 1936–1938. I look at the title of these vivid pages and calculate that Mary McCarthy was only twenty-four years old when the events of this period began. The pages are a continuation of the first volume, to which she gave the title: *How I Grew*. Sometimes with a sigh she would refer to the years ahead in her autobiography as “I seem to be embarked on how I grew and grew and grew.” I am not certain how many volumes she planned, but I had the idea she meant to go right down the line, inspecting the troops you might say, noting the slouches and the good soldiers and, of course, inspecting herself living in her time.

Here she is at the age of twenty-four, visiting the memory of it, but she was in her seventies when the

actual writing was accomplished. The arithmetic at both ends is astonishing. First, her electrifying ("to excite intensely or suddenly as if by electric shock") descent upon New York City just after her graduation from Vassar College. And then after more than twenty works of fiction, essays, cultural and political commentary, the defiant perseverance at the end when she was struck by an unfair series of illnesses, one after another. She bore these afflictions with a gallantry that was almost a disbelief, *her* disbelief, bore them with a high measure of hopefulness, that sometime companion in adversity that came not only from the treasure of consciousness but also, in her case, from an acute love of *being there* to witness the bizarre motions of history and the also, often, bizarre intellectual responses to them.

Intellectual responses are known as opinions and Mary had them and had them. Still she was so little of an ideologue as to be sometimes unsettling in her refusal of tribal reaction—left or right, male or female, that sort of thing. She was doggedly personal and often this meant being so aslant that there was, in this determined rationalist, an endearing crankiness, very American and homespun somehow. This was true especially in domestic matters, which held a high place in her life. There she is grinding the coffee beans of a morning in a wonderful wooden and iron contraption that seemed to me designed for muscle-building—a workout it was. In her acceptance speech upon re-

ceiving the MacDowell Colony Medal for Literature she said that she did not *believe* in laborsaving devices. And thus she kept on year after year, up to her last days, clacking away on her old green Hermes non-electric typewriter, with a feeling that this effort and the others were akin to the genuine in the arts—to the handmade.

I did not meet Mary until a decade or so after the years she writes about in this part of her autobiographical calendar. But I did come to know her well and to know most of the “characters,” if that is the right word for the friends, lovers, husbands, and colleagues who made up her cast after divorce from her first husband and the diversion of the second John, last name Porter, whom she did not marry. I also lived through much of the cultural and political background of the time, although I can understand the question asked, shyly, by a younger woman writing a biography of Mary: “Just what is a Trotskyite?” Trotskyite and Stalinist—part of one’s descriptive vocabulary, like blue-eyed. Trotsky, exiled by Stalin and assassinated in Mexico in 1940, attracted leftists, many of them with Socialist leanings, in opposition to the Stalin of the Moscow Trials, beginning in 1936, which ended in the execution of most of the original Bolsheviks and the terror that followed.

The preoccupation with the Soviet Union, which lasted, with violent mutations of emphasis, until just

about yesterday, was a cultural and philosophical battleground in the years of Mary McCarthy's "debut" and in the founding, or refounding, of the magazine *Partisan Review*. In that circle, the Soviet Union, the Civil War in Spain, Hitler and Mussolini, were what you might call real life but not in the magazine's pages more real, more apposite, than T. S. Eliot, Henry James, Kafka, and Dostoyevski.

The memoir is partly "ideas" and very much an account of those institutional rites that used to be recorded in the family Bible: marriage, children, divorce, and so on. Mary had only one child, her son, Reuel Wilson, but she had quite a lot of the other rites: four marriages, interspersed with love affairs of some seriousness and others of none. Far from taking the autobiographer's right to be selective about waking up in this bed or that, she tempts one to say that she remembers more than scrupulosity demands—demands of the rest of us at least as we look back on the insupportable surrenders and dim our recollection with the aid of the merciful censor.

On the other hand, what often seemed to be at stake in Mary's writing and in her way of looking at things was a somewhat obsessional concern for the integrity of sheer fact in matters both trivial and striking. "The world of fact, of figures even, of statistics . . . the empirical element in life . . . the fetishism of fact . . .": phrases taken from her essay "The Fact in Fiction" (1960). The facts of the matter are the truth,

as in a court case that tries to circumvent vague feelings and intuitions. If one would sometimes take the liberty of suggesting caution to her, advising prudence or mere practicality, she would look puzzled and answer: but it's the truth. I do not think she would have agreed it was only *her* truth—instead she often said she looked upon her writing as a mirror.

And thus she will write about her life under the command to put it all down. Even the name of the real man in the Brooks Brothers shirt in the fiction of the same name, but scarcely thought by anyone to be a fiction. So at last, and for the first time, she says, he becomes a fact named George Black, who lived in a suburb of Pittsburgh and belonged to the Duquesne Club. As in the story, he appeared again and wanted to rescue her from New York bohemian life, but inevitably he was an embarrassment. As such recapitulations are likely to be: Dickens with horror meeting the model for Dora in later life. Little Dora of *David Copperfield*: "What a form she had, what a face she had, what a graceful, variable, enchanting manner!" Of course, the man in the Brooks Brothers shirt did not occasion such affirmative adjectives but was examined throughout with a skeptical and subversive eye. About the young woman, the author herself more or less, more rather than less, she would write among many other thoughts: "It was not difficult, after all, to be the prettiest girl at a party for the share-croppers."

The early stories in *The Company She Keeps* could,

for once, rightly be called a sensation: they were indeed a sensation for candor, for the brilliant lightning flashes of wit, for the bravado, the confidence, and the splendor of the prose style. They are often about the clash of theory and practice, taste and ideology. Rich as they are in period details, they transcend the issues, the brand names, the intellectual fads. In "The Portrait of the Intellectual as a Yale Man," we have the conflict between abstract ideas and self-advancement, between probity and the wish to embrace the new and fashionable. About a young couple, she writes: "Every social assertion Nancy and Jim made carried its own negation with it, like an Hegelian thesis. Thus it was always being said by Nancy that someone was a Communist but a terribly nice man, while Jim was remarking that someone else worked for Young and Rubicam but was astonishingly liberal."

In the memoir, we learn that we can thank Edmund Wilson for turning the young Mary away from writing reviews to undertaking fiction and thereby producing these dazzling stories. We also learn that she thanks him for little else. A good deal of these pages left at her death tell about her affair with Philip Rahv and *analyze* the break, in fact a desertion, from him and her marriage to Wilson. I must say that much of this drama was new to me. I was not in New York at the time. I met Mary for the first time in the middle 1940s when I was invited to Philip Rahv's apartment. She was with a young man who was to be her next husband

after the "escape" from Wilson; that is, she was with Bowden Broadwater. Philip was married to Nathalie Swan, Mary's good friend from Vassar . . . A lot of water had flowed by.

The picture of Mary and Philip Rahv living in a borrowed apartment on East End Avenue, a fashionable street over by the wrong river since Philip was very much a downtown figure, rambling round the streets of Greenwich Village with a proprietary glance here and there for the tousled heads of Sidney Hook or Meyer Shapiro and a few others whom he called "luftmenschen." The memory, no matter the inevitable strains of difference between them, has an idyllic accent and she appears to have discovered in the writing, decades later, that she loved Rahv. There was to be an expulsion from the garden when Edmund Wilson met Mary, pursued her, and finally, a not very long "finally," got her to marry him.

The account of the moral struggle is a most curious and interesting one, an entangled conflict between inclination and obligation; the inclination to stay with Rahv and the obligation to herself, her principles, incurred when she got drunk and slept with Wilson and therefore had to marry him. The most engaging part of this struggle is not its credibility or inner consistency but the fact that Mary believed it to be the truth. There was a certain Jesuitical aspect to her moral life which for me was part of her originality and one of the outstanding charms of her presence. Very little was

offhand; habits, prejudices, moments, even fleeting ones, had to be accounted for, looked at, and written in the ledger. I sometimes thought she felt the command to prepare and serve a first course at dinner ought to be put in the Bill of Rights.

I remember telling her about some offensive behavior to me on the part of people who were not her friends but mere acquaintances, if that. When she saw them on the street up in Maine she would faithfully “cut them”—a phrase she sometimes used—while I, when her back was turned, would be waving from the car. Yet it must be said that Mary was usually concerned to make up with those she had offended in fiction, where they were amusingly trapped in their peculiarities, recognizable, in their little ways, not to mention their large ways. Among these were Philip and Nathalie Rahv, whom she had wounded, painfully for them, in a novella, *The Oasis*. They too made up, after a time, after a time.

Details, details. Consider the concreteness of the apartments, the clothes, the inquisitive, entranced observing that had something in it of the Goncourt brothers putting it all down in the Paris of the second half of the nineteenth century. They will write: “On today’s bill of fare in the restaurants we have authentic buffalo, antelope, and Kangaroo.” There it is, if not quite as arresting as Flaubert making love in a brothel with his hat on. Mary remembers from the long-flown years that they on a certain occasion drank “Singapore Slingers.” And the minutiae of her first apartment in

New York: "We had bought ourselves a tall 'modernistic' Russel Wright cocktail shaker made of aluminum with a wood top, a chromium hors d'oeuvres tray with glass dishes (using industrial materials was the idea), and six silver Old-Fashioned spoons with a simulated cherry at one end and the bottom of the spoon flat, for crushing sugar and Angostura." The cocktail age, how menacing and beguiling to the sweet tooth, a sort of liquid mugger.

Unlike the Goncourts' rather mad nocturnal stenography to fill their incomparable pages, I don't think Mary kept a diary. At least I never heard mention of one nor felt the chill on rash spontaneity that such an activity from this shrewdly observing friend would cast upon an evening. From these pages and from the previous volume, it appears that she must have kept clippings, letters certainly, playbills, school albums, and made use of minor research to get it right—to be sure the young man in Seattle played on the football team. In these years of her life, she treasured who was in such and such a play seen in an exact theater. On the whole, though, I believe the scene setting, the action, the dialogue, came from memory. These memories, pleasing and interesting to me at every turn, are a bit of history of the times. Going to *Pins and Needles*, the Federal Theater's tribute to the Ladies' Garment Workers' Union, a plain little musical with fewer of the contemporary theater's special effects than a performance of the church choir.

The pages of this memoir represent the beginning

of Mary McCarthy's literary life. She was a prodigy from the first. I remember coming across an early review when I was doing some work in the New York Public Library. It was dazzling, a wonderfully accomplished composition, written soon after she left college. As she began, so she continued, and in the years ahead I don't think she changed very much. There was a large circle of friends in France, England, and Italy as well as here at home, but Mary was too eccentric in her tastes to be called snobbish and I would not find her an especially worldly person. She was not fashionable so much as discriminating; but beyond it all there was the sentimental and romantic streak in her nature that cast a sort of girlish glow over private and public arrangements.

Year in and year out, she made fantastical demands on her time and her budget for birthdays, Christmas; presents, banquets, bouquets, surprises, a whole salmon for the Fourth of July, traditional offering. I remember Natasha Nabokov, the mother of Ivan Nabokov, a publisher in Paris, telling me of a Thanksgiving in Paris where Mary found an approximation of the American turkey and brought forth "two dressings, one chestnut and one oyster." Keeping the faith, it was. I often thought the holiday calendar was a command like the liturgical calendar with its dates and observances. Perhaps it was being an orphan, both of her parents having died in the flu epidemic of 1918, that led her to put such unusual stress on the reproduction of "family" gatherings.

Here she speaks of her "patrician" background, a word I never heard her use about herself. It was true that she came from the upper middle class, lawyers and so on, but all of it had been lived so far away in Minnesota and the state of Washington that one never thought of her as Middlewestern or Western but instead as American as one can be without any particularity of region or class. In any case, she created even in small, unpromising apartments a sort of miniature *haute bourgeois* scenery, without being imitative. And she would arrive in New York with Mark Cross leather luggage, a burdensome weight even when empty, pairs of white leather gloves, a rolled umbrella, all of it bringing to mind ladies of a previous generation—and no thought of convenience. Of course, she didn't believe in convenience.

Wide friendships and hospitality, yes, but there were, in my view, only two persons outside the family circle for whom she felt a kind of reverence. The two were Hannah Arendt and Nicola Chiaramonte, both Europeans. They met for Mary every standard of intellectual and moral integrity. Chiaramonte, a beautiful man with dark curls and brown (I think) eyes, was a curiosity in the *Partisan* circle because of his great modesty and the moderation of his voice in discussion, a gentle word for what was usually a cacophony of argument. An evening at the Rahvs was to enter a ring of bullies, each one bullying the other. In that way it was different from the boarding school accounts of the type, since no one was in ascendance. Instead there

was an equality of vehemence that exhausted itself and the wicked bottles of Four Roses whiskey around midnight—until the next time. Chiaramonte, with his peaceable, anarchist inclinations, was outclassed here.

I suppose he could be called a refugee, this Italian cultural and social critic and anti-Fascist. Here he published essays but did not create a literary presence equal to his important career when he returned to Italy in the late 1940s. After his death, Mary wrote a long, interesting essay in order to introduce an American edition of his writings on the theater. I remember an anecdote she told me about Chiaramonte, and it alone is sufficient to show why she so greatly admired him. The story went as follows: stopped at a border, trying to escape the Nazi drive across Europe, Nicola was asked for his passport and he replied: Do you want the real one or the false one?

Hannah Arendt, of course, was or became an international figure with *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, and other works. I can remember Mary at Hannah's apartment on Riverside Drive, a setting that was candidly practical, a neat place, tending toward a mute shade of beige in its appointments. For an occasional gathering there would be drinks and coffee and, German style it seemed to us, cakes and chocolates and nuts bought in abundance at the bakeries on Broadway. Mary was, quite literally, enchanted by Hannah's mind, her scholarship, her industry, and the complexities of her views. As for

Hannah, I think perhaps she saw Mary as a golden American friend, perhaps the best the country could produce, with a bit of our western states in her, a bit of the Roman Catholic, a Latin student, and a sort of New World, blue-stocking *salonnière* like Rachel Varnhagen, about whom Hannah had, in her early years, written a stunning, unexpected book. The friendship of these two women was very moving to observe in its purity of respect and affection. After Hannah's death, Mary's extraordinary efforts to see her friend's unfinished work on questions of traditional philosophy brought to publication, the added labor of estate executor, could only be called sacrificial.

I gave the address at the MacDowell Colony when Mary received the Medal and there I said that if she was, in her writing, sometimes a scourge, a Savonarola, she was a very cheerful one, lighthearted and even optimistic. I could not find in her work a trace of despair and alienation; instead she had a dreamy expectation that persons and nations should do their best. Perhaps it would be unlikely that a nature of such exceptional energy could act out alienation, with its temptation to sloth. Indeed it seemed to me that Mary did not understand even the practical usefulness of an occasional resort to the devious. Her indiscretions were always open and forthright and in many ways one could say she was "like an open book." Of course, everything interesting depends upon which book is open.

Among the many charms and interests of this unfinished memoir are the accounts of the volatility of her relations with the men in her life. She will say that she doesn't know why she left her first husband, backed out on John Porter, and deserted Philip Rahv. That is, she doesn't know *exactly* but can only speculate. What, perhaps, might be asked nowadays is why the gifted and beautiful young woman was so greatly attracted to marriage in the first place, why she married at twenty-one. She seemed swiftly to overlook the considerable difficulties of unmarried couples "living together" at the time: the subterfuge about staying overnight, facing the elevator man, hiding the impugning clothes when certain people appeared, keeping the mate off the phone lest there be a call from home—unimaginable strategies in the present-day cities. There were many things Mary didn't believe in, but she certainly believed in marriage, or rather in being married. She had no talent at all for the single life, or even for waiting after a divorce, a break. However, once married, she made a strikingly independent wife, an abbess within the cloister, so to speak.

In a foreword to the paperback edition of *Memories of a Catholic Girlhood*, she speaks of the treasures gained from her education in Catholic convent and boarding schools, even finding a benefit in the bias of Catholic history as taught: "To care for the quarrels of the past, to identify oneself passionately with a cause that became, politically speaking, a losing cause with the birth