Mary Whitcomb Hess (1893-1987)

Mary Whitcomb Hess was born December 11, 1893 in the small farming town of Hayden, in Southern Indiana. She was the daughter of Harry Young Whitcomb and Caroline Elizabeth Nighswander.

After graduating from Hayden High School she began teaching in a one-room eight-grade country school near Hayden, taking teacher-training courses during the summers. In the following years she taught high school Latin and English in Vernon Indiana.

In 1918 she married John Hess and moved to Lawrence, Kansas where her husband would become a professor of French at the University of Kansas. There, Mary Whitcomb Hess continued her studies, receiving a BA in Philosophy in 1926 and membership in Phi Beta Kappa.

The following year, Mary Whitcomb Hess, her husband, and two small sons, Harry and John, made their home in Athens, Ohio when John Hess became chairman of the German department at Ohio University (1927-1950). In 1930 their daughter, Mary Carolina was born. During this time, Mary went on to obtain an MA in Philosophy in 1936, her thesis being an account of the life and teachings of the 17th century English Quaker and mystic Isaac Penington. Her published book, *The Name is Living* (1936) was a result of her thesis.

Mary Whitcomb Hess had a life-long interest in the philosophy of language and thought. Early in her writing career she developed the theory that the individual can directly confront the objects of knowledge within the structure of poetic language. This ability to transcend the static meaning of words had a direct bearing on much of her writing. In 1927 Warner Fite of Princeton University described her philosophical theories of poetry as, “very Platonic and somewhat mystically Einsteinian”.

Over the years (1925-1975), Mary Whitcomb Hess wrote on such varied topics as philosophy, literature, political and social theory, music, art, and mysticism. Over 160 articles were published in scholarly, religious, and trade publications. Mary Whitcomb Hess was listed in *Who’s Who in Philosophy* in 1942 and in *American Catholic Who’s Who*. At least nine published anthologies include her poems.

Her poetic vision and focus in well over 150 published poems included a strong identity with nature, the delight in the seasons, finding beauty in the ordinary, and meaning in the spiritual and mystical facets of life.

In 1942, influenced in large part by the teachings of St. Thomas Aquinas, she became a member of the Catholic religion. And many of her later poems reflect her enthusiasm and devotion to her newfound faith.

On October 12, 1988 she was the subject of a special one-day symposium, sponsored by Ohio University’s Department of Philosophy. In the words of Dr. George Weckman, this was an opportunity, “--- to honor a distinguished graduate”. During this symposium, Dr. Donald Borchert, and Dr. Stanley Grean, presented scholarly papers on the philosophical thoughts of M. Whitcomb Hess. At the symposium her daughter, Mary Carolina Hess, a member of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, presented the Philosophy Department with a rare 1681 edition of the book, *The Works of Isaac Penington*, which belonged to her mother. She also presented the department copies of her mother’s articles (1924-1974) and an annotated bibliographical checklist.

Mary Whitcomb Hess continued writing up until her death at the age of 93 at Raphael’s Home in Columbus, Ohio on February 12, 1987.