MEMORIAL RESOLUTION
Mary Burgan
(1935-2017)

For some thirty years, Mary Burgan taught in the Department of English and Victorian Studies program, chairing the department throughout most of the ‘80s and later serving as an associate dean. In 1994, she assumed the position of general secretary of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) in Washington D.C., which she held until her retirement in 2002. She maintained a residence in Washington with her husband Bill, a distinguished Victorianist at Indiana in his own right, until the time of her passing on January 12, 2017.

Mary majored in English at Seton Hill College, graduating magna cum laude in 1958. She earned a Ph.D. in English from the University of Illinois, now the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in 1964. After a preliminary interview with faculty at Indiana, she then met with the department’s chair, Joe Barber, who saw in Mary the intelligence and promise his colleagues recognized, and Mary joined the faculty of the department in the fall of 1964. But, enormously impressed as they were with her, none of her future colleagues foresaw the range and worth of all that she was to accomplish in her fruitful decades in the academy.

Mary Burgan did it all. She was a strong teacher. She began, as we all did then, by teaching introductory courses in composition and the rudiments of literary understanding. Mary never forgot that English teachers are writing teachers. I remember sitting with her and one of her students in an otherwise empty classroom and watching Mary march back and forth to the board as she outlined, section by section, a plausible argument for the student’s dissertation. I don’t think that Mary expected the student to drop her own plan for her dissertation and adopt the shape Mary was making for the argument. Her point was rather that there was a better shape to be made, and undoubtedly, on further thought, better shapes still, and Mary presumed that the student would think about what Mary had done and find her own way to clarify and fortify her argument.

Mary brought the same precisely-directed energy to all her teaching, to big undergraduate lecture courses on fiction as well as to undergraduate courses and graduate seminars in 19th-century British literature and 20th-century British and American women writers. When it came her turn to teach children’s and young adult literature, an assignment once commonly distributed among faculty members who studied Victorian literature and who had children, Mary became excited by the intellectual and historical interest of these literary traditions. Two of the graduates of her seminars in these topics, Kara Keeling and Claudia Nelson, became presidents of the Children’s Literature Association. Until she left the department, Mary never stopped pressing her colleagues to approve a faculty appointment in the study of writing for young readers (and listeners), on the practical ground that this was a good way for the department to participate in the training of elementary- and secondary-school teachers, and on the perhaps higher ground that these were literatures whose history, conventions, and remarkable texts will deeply reward the study of literary and cultural historians and critics.

Although the department never did appoint someone whose principal interests were in writing for young people, Mary had a way of often getting her way. In the memories that lit the screens on e-mail and Facebook as news of her death began to circulate, words like “steely-willed” and “indomitable”
and “formidable” appeared frequently. True enough, but these phrases are almost always accompanied by tributes to her kindness and, in Linda Charnes’ words, her “personal warmth.” Mary was an exceptionally effective departmental chair because she consistently promoted and protected the large claims and requirements of English as a humane discipline while closely attending to the particular needs and possibilities of her students and colleagues. “Introduced to the profession by Mary Burgan,” Mary Favret wrote, “one should be forgiven for believing the impossible, that the university can be a human community, that education can re-create individuals, and that learning demands an atmosphere of freedom.” If I too believe that, and on good days I still do, it is in significant part because I worked with Mary Burgan and colleagues like her as we learned from one another how to participate fully in the academy and our profession.

By the time that Mary left Bloomington in 1994 to become the executive director of the AAUP in Washington, DC, she had created a solid body of writing on literary topics – essays on British and American women writers and on parenting and music in Victorian literature, and her book on gender, illness and identity in the life and writing of Katherine Mansfield. She continued to write on such topics, on the teaching of *Jane Eyre*, for example, and on the figure of the city as a human body in Victorian writing. But in Washington she engaged fully, one might say furiously, in large matters of academic policy – academic freedom and the protection of tenure, faculty unionization, the presence of the faculty in campus governance. She went to campuses (Bennington, the University of Minnesota) to speak and to join in faculty protests against infringements of academic freedom; she helped out in drives to turn AAUP chapters into unions; she testified before committees and commissions; she appeared on C-Span. After she retired from the directorship of the AAUP in 2004, in her book *What Ever Happened to the Faculty?* (2006), Mary strenuously argued her case for, and cogently presented her worries about, the central necessity of faculty authority in academic governance. She was certainly right to worry, given the currently enfeebled state of faculty governance. But that very condition makes her argument even more necessary and useful now than it was over a decade ago.

In the five or six years preceding her death, Mary had been writing a history of her family, especially her father’s family, beginning with its emigration from Ireland to Savannah in the middle of the 19th century to help build the railroads and canals. She became an accomplished and, in her customary way, an indefatigable historian. She rooted out letters and diaries, got in touch with cousins and other relations whom she sometimes had never previously met, read microfilm copies of old newspapers, found educational and medical records, read local histories, consulted even the headstones in old cemeteries (on which sometimes the name of the county in Ireland from which the deceased had emigrated was inscribed). Every two or three months she would print and send to me a chapter or a long passage of the book in progress, or phone to tell me what she had recently found. (Typescript and telephone: like old times.) I would write back to comment on what she had written, or we would talk for an hour or so about what she had found and how it fit into the story she was discovering. Our very last conversation, late last fall when she had just been moved into a rehabilitation facility, was brief. “I got to get out of here,” she said. “I got to finish the book.”

Mary did not get to finish the book. She left to her children and grandchildren some wonderfully detailed stories about how their forebears became American, in just the ways promised by the immigrant dream and drive of the 19th and early 20th century. So, in a sense, if she did not finish her book, Mary left too some accounts of the difficult circumstances in which she grew up, a matter that she explored with a growing air of sympathy and understanding. Mary did complete her story, as in the last
pages she wrote she settled into a complex recognition of where she came from and how she came to be who she was.

Mary Burgan was, in the honorific phrase, a woman of parts. She kept all the parts in play, all the time, steadily taking herself and her manifold gifts onto new ground for their exercise, while holding them all together with the conviction that it was not only exciting to learn but that it did people good to know. At a memorial service in Washington Harry Burgan, Mary and Bill’s son, said of his mother, “Mom was exceptional, but she never thought she was the exception. She believed everyone had the same potential as her. And she encouraged them.” In Mary’s view that was what her profession was for, and in her practice of it she fashioned a character and an accomplishment that stand as complicated, rounded, and entire.

We request that this memorial tribute to Mary Burgan be presented to the members of the Bloomington Faculty Council, that it be preserved in its minutes and archive, and that after its presentation copies be sent to members of her family.

Don Gray
Professor Emeritus
Department of English
Indiana University Bloomington