



History: The Mary Simpson Fund

The below was written by Gavin Bolton, friend and colleague of Mary Simpson. Gavin outlines the history of the woman in whose name so many teachers have been able to attend our Conferences and Regional events.

Mary Simpson nee Robson (1907-92)

Having begun her career as a Primary school teacher in 1924 Mary Robson was appointed to the newly set up Emergency Training College in 1946, (becoming a two-year training establishment after three years and then, in 1961 amalgamating with Neville's Cross College, Durham) under the auspices of the University of Durham. It was based at Wynyard Hall, property of Lord Londonderry whose estate is on the edge of Teesside. From the start a feature of the college was the insistence by the Principal that it should revive the pre-war tradition of the Londonderry family of promoting the Arts by arranging concerts and play performances for the local community. This is how Mary, an artist, actress, theatre director and much loved trainer of teachers established her reputation in the North-East. Her early productions included 'Tobias and the Angel' and 'Peer Gynt'. One of her students at that time recalls that 'She nurtured everyone and brought out the best in them. She was kind, gentle and unassuming with a twinkle in her eye and a wonderful sense of humour.'

Such was her reputation that Professor Brian Stanley, Director of Durham University Institute of Education, in 1950 offered her the post of working with experienced Drama teachers (there was no other such post in the UK) but she turned this down because she wanted to continue to work in Art as well as Drama. Her non-acceptance of such an invitation is not without its significance in the history of UK Drama Education, for Dorothy Heathcote would not have been appointed and her whole career and influence on the world's drama teaching would have been much less influential had she accepted it. And my career too would have been seriously affected, for it was Mary Robson who introduced Dorothy and me to each other when I was appointed Durham Drama Adviser in 1961. She invited us both to tea (a popular way of entertaining guests all those many years ago!) and because I replaced Dorothy at Durham University two years later when she moved on to Newcastle we were able to share our work for the next 30 years!

In 1969 Mary retired and in 1978 she married her cousin, John Alfred Simpson (popularly known as Alf Simpson), also an artist. She died in 1992.