

= Helen C. White =

Helen C. White ( November 26 , 1896 ? June 7 , 1967 ) was a professor of English at the University of Wisconsin ? Madison . White twice served as the English department chair and was the first woman to become a full professor in the university 's College of Letters and Science . She was also the first woman elected president of the American Association of University Professors , and a president of the American Association of University Women ( AAUW ) , University of Wisconsin Teachers ' Union , and University Club . White wrote six novels and numerous nonfiction books and articles .

White was raised in Boston in a Roman Catholic household , and kept the faith for the rest of her life . She graduated from the Girls ' High School and Radcliffe College . After completing her master 's degree , she taught at Smith College for two years before moving West to study for her doctorate in Madison . White loved the city and became an assistant professor there upon completing her Ph.D. in 1924 with a dissertation on William Blake . She taught courses including freshman English and metaphysical poetry graduate seminars . White 's students included writers such as August Derleth , Herbert Kubly , and Mark Schorer . Graduate students called her " the Purple Goddess " partly due to her predominantly purple wardrobe and exceptional height .

In her 48 @-@ year career , White received 23 honorary doctorates , a Laetare Medal , a Siena Medal , an AAUW achievement award , and two Guggenheim Fellowships . She became an Honorary Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1958 for her scholarship . White was a United States delegate at two UNESCO events and was on the boards of several organizations . Upon her death , the university built Helen C. White Hall in her name . The building houses the university 's English department and undergraduate library , which contains 4 @,@ 000 books from White 's collection .

= = Early life and career = =

Helen Constance White was born November 26 , 1896 , in New Haven , Connecticut . Her parents , Mary ( née King ) and John White , had three other children ( one female , two male ) and ran a Roman Catholic household , a faith White maintained passionately for the rest of her life . In 1901 , her parents chose to settle in the new Boston suburb Roslindale for the city 's cultural opportunities . White 's father left his job as a New York , New Haven and Hartford Railroad clerk to become a civil servant . White described her mother as matriarchal and her father as secretive .

Beginning in 1909 , White attended the Boston Girls ' High School , where she was studious and performed well in school . She participated in the Debating Club and became the editor @-@ in @-@ chief of her school paper , Distaff , in her senior year . She graduated in 1913 and received a Margaret A. Badger Scholarship and an Old South Historical Society prize . During this time , she was a member of the Massachusetts suffrage movement .

White started at Radcliffe College later that year and graduated summa cum laude in three years with a bachelor 's degree in English . White was awarded a Phi Beta Kappa key and the George B. Sohler bachelor 's thesis prize at her 1916 graduation . She continued at Radcliffe and completed her master 's degree in 1917 , whereupon she sought teaching posts . In September , White became an Assistant in Smith College 's English department , where she taught English for two years . Her friends suggested that she pursue her doctoral study " out West " in Madison , Wisconsin ? a proposition White accepted .

= = Madison = =

White arrived for the 1919 fall semester . She was not familiar with Wisconsin , but quickly came to love Madison and its university , particularly for its people 's open spirit and school pride . Her new apartment would become her longtime home . White worked as an Instructor in the English department and university library while she worked on her doctorate . As a graduate student , she held office hours on Saturday mornings for anyone interested in her tutoring , often at the expense

of her own work . White graduated in 1924 and became an assistant professor the next year . By 1936 , she had become a full professor , the first woman to do so in Letters and Science at the university .

She taught several classes , including freshman English , 17th century English literature , metaphysical poetry , and a graduate course in John Donne , George Herbert , Andrew Marvell , Richard Crashaw , and Henry Vaughan . Margaret Thoma of Demcourier described White 's English 5 writing seminar as " now famous " in 1942 . White taught two classes when the Wisconsin Writers ' Institute opened in 1945 . White 's classes emphasized unambiguous writing and constructive , honest feedback . She was known to amiably reply to all of her mail . White used a four desk system in her apartment , where each desk served a specific function : personal letters , low @-@ priority book notes , high @-@ priority work , or typing . Some of her most notable students , such as August Derleth , Herbert Kubly , and Mark Schorer , continued to rely on White 's editorial opinion after their own careers were established . Mark Schorer wrote that White 's " patience " , " tact " , " humor " , and " sympathy " were the fundamentals of her successful style . White considered teaching " not only stimulating but ... the most worthwhile thing a person can do . "

White had little time to write due to her other academic obligations , and once said , " belonging to things is an occupational disease of my profession " . White became the English department chair in 1955 and once again in 1961 . As chair , White recruited faculty members from established universities , fought for the recognition of her staff , and worked with the faculty members individually , as she would with her students . She wrote in the summers , often while she traveled . Aided by Guggenheim Fellowships , White visited most of Europe . On her first fellowship , she traveled in Italy and studied at Oxford University and the British Museum between 1928 and 1929 for a year . While abroad , White wrote English Devotional Literature , 1600 ? 1640 and was inspired to start her first novel , A Watch in the Night . In mid @-@ 1930 , she received her second fellowship to verify her work in England . She received a grant from the university to finish her 1935 The Metaphysical Poets in London . White was a visiting scholar at the California Huntington Library between 1939 and 1940 , where she worked on Social Criticism in Popular Religious Literature of the Sixteenth Century . She returned to the library in mid @-@ 1941 . White was a visiting professor at Barnard College between 1943 and 1944 , and a visiting professor at Columbia University during the summer of 1948 . She also had a strong interest in poetry , though she didn 't think highly of her own .

White developed a reputation for frequently wearing purple clothes , a choice made for convenience . White referred to herself as " the large woman in purple " , and the English department grad students called her " the Purple Goddess " . Toni McNaron wrote that the " Goddess " appellation was partly due to her exceptional height : over six feet .

White retired in 1965 after 48 years of teaching and administration . In her retirement , White was appointed to the university 's Institute for Research in the Humanities . She suffered a heart attack in 1966 , whereupon her health declined , though she continued to work at the university 's Memorial Library . In the next spring , White became sick and died on June 7 , 1967 . Neither she nor her three siblings had married . A memorial service was held in Madison 's St. Paul 's University Chapel on May 19 , 1968 .

= = Work and recognition = =

White published her first short story when she was 13 . Her first major project was The Mysticism of William Blake , a modified version of her dissertation . It was published in 1927 by the University of Wisconsin Press . She later wrote six novels , including A Watch in the Night ( 1933 ) , Not Built with Hands , To the End of the World , and Dust on a King 's Highway . The Wisconsin State Journal wrote that her novels were highly praised for their historical settings , views towards religion , and contemplative psychology . White also authored Tudor Books of Private Devotion , English Devotional Literature , 1600 ? 1640 , Victorian Prose , The Metaphysical Poets ( 1935 ) , Social Criticism in Popular Religious Literature of the Sixteenth Century , and numerous articles . Her religious works stemmed from her Roman Catholic reverence . White described her publishers as kind for publishing her unpopular scholarly works in @-@ between her profitable novels .

White was the first female elected president of the American Association of University Professors and thrice served as president of the American Association of University Women ( AAUW ) , including from 1941 to 1947 . White received an AAUW achievement award in 1949 for her scholarly work and international service in the humanities . She also served as the vice president of the International Federation of University Women , president of the University of Wisconsin Teachers ' Union , and the first woman president of the University Club . White was awarded two Guggenheim Fellowships , the 1942 Laetare Medal , the 1944 Siena Medal , the 1947 Radcliffe Alumni Association 's Distinguished Achievement Award for Education , and 23 honorary degrees from places such as Miami University , Mount Mary College , Mount Saint Scholastica College , Rockford College , Smith College , and Wilson College . She became an Honorary Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire in 1958 for her renown as a scholar of 16th and 17th century English literature . In 1959 she was elected a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences . White was on the United States National commission for UNESCO and represented the United States twice at UNESCO meetings : the 1946 Preparatory Commission for UNESCO and the 1947 second UNESCO General Conference held in Mexico City . White was also on the 1946 U.S. Education Mission to Germany . Additionally , she sat on the boards of the National Conference of Christians and Jews , the American Council on Education , and the Phi Beta Kappa Senate , and was appointed by the U.S. President to the Fulbright Board of Foreign Scholarships .

Upon her death , the University of Wisconsin named a new building after her . It houses the undergraduate library , known as College Library . Helen C. White Hall sits on the edge of campus near Lake Mendota and is seven stories tall . The English department moved from Bascom Hall to the new building when it opened in September 1971 . The library holds White 's donation of over 4 @, @ 000 books . The building also houses the philosophy department , library school , and Cooperative Children 's Book Center . Hazel McGrath wrote that " no more fitting monument to one of its most eminent scholars could have been built by the University of Wisconsin " .