

Alice Mary Briant

February 22, 1899 — March 14, 1988

The Ithaca and Cornell community lost an exceptional and unique member when Alice Mary “Molly” Briant died in the Ithaca Reconstruction Home on March 14, 1988 after an extended illness.

Born in Helsby, Cheshire, England, she was educated in private schools, receiving the general school certificate from Queen’s School in Chester. In 1925 she emigrated to Montreal, Canada, following an older brother. Between 1926 and 1938, she supported herself as a secretary. During the latter part of these years, she studied with a major in chemistry and received a B.S. degree in agriculture in 1938 from MacDonald College, McGill University. She began graduate studies at Cornell in 1938 and received both a Master’s and Ph.D. from Cornell.

From 1944 to 1962 when she retired, she served as a member of the faculty of the College of Human Ecology in the Department of Food and Nutrition. During that time she was a member of the graduate committee of more than 30 graduate students who were attracted to her because of her knowledge and ability in research methodology.

Her research interests were directed at studies of the effects of different flours, starches and cooking conditions on a wide range of products. She developed principles for cooking with New York State soft wheat flour, and did research on the quality and vitamin retention in cooked fresh and frozen vegetables. She considered statistical analysis of research data to be of prime importance in any research effort and encouraged and assisted many graduate students in the department as they worked on thesis projects. She was an early advocate of the use of sensory methods of analysis of food quality and worked towards standards for sensory evaluations as a member of the American Society for Testing and Materials Sensory Standards Committee. She actively participated in other professional organizations including the American Association of Cereal Chemists, the Institute of Food Technology, and the American Home Economics Association.

Her teaching activities involved teaching summer sessions at Cornell and other universities including Northern Illinois, Utah State, Washington State, and British Columbia, Canada. For several years after retirement, she continued to teach in summer sessions.

Among her talents, an outstanding quality was her ability to understand humans of all ages. She related well to graduate students, reached them on an intellectual level, encouraged them to think for themselves and helped them to set their sights high. Students considered Molly or “Miss B”, as they called her, an ideal major professor.

She permitted, even expected, a large amount of independence, but was available and willing to provide advice and assistance when appropriate. Her research assistants learned from her daily, though much of her teaching was indirect. Her zest for continued learning was contagious.

Miss B's sense of humor helped her and her students over the rough spots. She was interested in her students as persons and contributed to the development of their self-confidence. Although she was not effusive in her praise, she had her own ways of showing her approval. Today her former students agree that her influence was tremendous and long lasting.

Molly Briant had a consuming passion for nature in all its manifestations. She was proficient in identifying birds in the area and students remember visiting her at her home on Warren Road where birds were accustomed to eating from her hand. She was also cognizant of plant life and led many student expeditions to choice wild strawberry patches and to study early spring flowers. In retirement, these passions continued and took her on bird and plant tours in Africa, Australia, Central America and many countries in Europe.

Other pursuits of Molly's included woodworking, metal work, weaving and embroidery. Her standard of craftsmanship was of a very high level and many of her friends received examples which they treasure.

One aspect of Molly's life which few of her friends were aware of was the extent of her generosity to individuals and causes she deemed worthy of her help. She lived frugally but quietly, and unselfishly shared her assets with others.

Mary A Morrison, Kathleen Rhodes, Gertrude Armbruster