
GERMAINE BRÉE



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GERMAINE BRÉE, one of the great figures in the field of French studies in the United States, died on 22 September 2001 at the age of ninety-three. If French literature and culture and the French language became, indisputably, *the* foreign culture, *the* foreign language, and *the* foreign literature of choice in American colleges and universities in the postwar period, it is largely due to the extraordinary efforts and devotion of two remarkable people, two bigger-than-life figures, Henri Peyre and Germaine Brée. Their intellectual offspring—their former students—populated most of the major French departments in the United States for several generations and extended their influence in the most positive manner. While Peyre's American career was almost entirely at Yale University, followed by a post-retirement appointment at the CUNY Graduate Center, Germaine Brée's encompassed four institutions.

Following her graduate studies at the Sorbonne (she passed the "Agrégation d'Anglais" in 1932) and a year at Bryn Mawr College, she taught for four years in Oran, Algeria, and then joined the French faculty at Bryn Mawr as lecturer in 1936 (she eventually rose to the rank of professor). In 1953, she was named chair of the French department at New York University's Washington Square College, only the second woman in the college's history to chair a department. The following year she was made head of New York University's entire Department of Romance Languages; from 1958 to 1960, she was the head of Romance and Slavic Languages and Literatures.

Germaine Brée's stay at NYU coincided with the beginning of a major ascension by the university to national prominence. She trained outstanding students, brought in a young and dynamic faculty, and turned French into one of NYU's outstanding assets. It was Germaine Brée who, with vision and hard work, founded La Maison Française, the cultural center that soon became an obligatory stop for visiting French writers, intellectuals, artists, political figures, business leaders, and scientists. This required the support of the university, the private sector, and the French government. Germaine set about to get all the above: the Schlumberger family contributed the funds needed, the university made available a lovely building in Washington Mews, and the French ambassador and cultural counselor (the formidable Édouard Morot-Sir, who became her good friend and later coauthor) provided valuable support.

In 1960, Germaine Brée moved to the University of Wisconsin at Madison with an appointment as Vilas Professor and permanent member of the newly founded Institute for Research in the Humanities. Liberated from her previous, arduous administrative tasks, Brée continued

her intense activity as critic, academic leader, and visiting scholar and professor in universities around the world, and as trainer of outstanding students, now in Wisconsin's prestigious French department.

Germaine Brée was sixty-seven years old when she made her last career move, to Wake Forest University as Kenan Professor of the Humanities. She remained active in that function from 1973 to 1984, when she retired. She was named emerita, and remained in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, until her death in 2001.

Through her numerous, widely acclaimed publications, Germaine Brée introduced generations of Americans to the outstanding French writers of her time. Her earliest books, written in French and quickly translated into English, were pioneering studies of two of the giants of the first half of the twentieth century: Marcel Proust and André Gide (*Du Temps perdu au temps retrouvé*, 1950; *Marcel Proust and the Deliverance from Time*, 1956; *André Gide, l'insaisissable Protée*, 1953; *Gide*, 1963). Her book *An Age of Fiction: The French Novel from Gide to Camus*, coauthored with Margaret Guiton in 1957, was one of the key critical works on the subject.

Certainly Germaine Brée's most famous book was her critical biography, *Camus*, published in 1959 (and frequently republished). She wrote extensively on this, her favorite author and friend, including a very successful critical college edition of *L'Étranger*, and *Camus and Sartre: Crisis and Commitment* in 1972, a probing comparative analysis that clearly came down in favor of the former. Germaine Brée had firmly established herself as the leading scholar/critic of Albert Camus. Other books by her include *Women Writers in France*, 1973; the twentieth-century volume of an important history of French literature, *Littérature française*, 1978; *Du Surréalisme à L'Empire de la critique* (with Édouard Morot-Sir), 1981; as well as landmark anthologies, *Twentieth Century French Drama* (with Alexander Kroff), 1969, and *Defeat and Beyond, an Anthology of French Wartime Writing* (with G. Bernauer), 1970. These are but the most notable elements of a remarkably vast bibliography, with writings on Marguerite Duras, Samuel Beckett, Colette, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Monique Wittig, Nathalie Sarraute, Jean Genet, André Malraux, Michel Leiris, and many others. She sensitized American readers to the best that was being produced in French fiction and theater.

Germaine Brée's energy and enthusiasm were legendary. She accepted visiting professorships in universities around the world and served numerous professional societies in often demanding functions. These included the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the National Humanities Faculty, the Amer-

ican Philosophical Society, and most notably the Modern Language Association, which elected her as president in 1975. She served on the board of trustees of Wellesley College and Mount Holyoke College, was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and was awarded two dozen honorary degrees by colleges and universities.

If Germaine Brée was widely admired as one of the most influential and most respected critics and teachers of French literature and literature in general, she was loved by her colleagues and students as an unusually caring, nurturing mentor, leader, and role model. She shared with others, young and old, the joy of reading, of learning, and of teaching. Truly an inspirational figure, she was a great educator, in the best sense of the term. Her impact was perhaps best described by Henri Peyre in the foreword that he contributed to a 1975 *Festschrift* by Germaine Brée's students in which he caught the essence of his colleague:

. . . a great professor can open up other minds, assist with unstinting patience, inspire, and lead. Such a teacher and molder of minds is Germaine Brée. She has aroused affection, admiration, and devotion in many of her colleagues and in all those who have studied with her. She has encouraged independence, dissent, even contradiction. She has proved a collaborator for her students far more than a master delivering oracular truths. . . . She always eschewed flattery as she eschewed demagogy. . . . Germaine Brée has brought to her task qualities of intellectual precision, of penetrating judgment and of disciplined taste essential to a critic of the first rank. . . . All her writings have aimed at enlarging the intelligent audience for modern letters, in a culture which enjoys the literature of France because it finds it broadening, humane, and in touch with life.¹

Germaine Brée was born in the town of Lasalle in the Gard region of southern France. When she was five, her family moved to the English Channel Islands, first to Guernsey in 1912 and then to Jersey five years later. Germaine was sixteen when the family returned to France in 1923 so that she could complete her education.

During World War II she took a leave from her appointment at Bryn Mawr to volunteer for the Free French army. She served initially as an ambulance driver in North Africa and later as an intelligence officer in Algiers and in metropolitan France. She was promoted to the

¹ George Stambolian, ed., *Twentieth Century French Fiction, Essays for Germaine Brée*, with an introduction by Henri Peyre (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1975), viii–x.

rank of lieutenant, received a Bronze Star, and was subsequently awarded the Legion of Honor for her wartime service. In 1952, she became a naturalized American citizen. Germaine Brée is survived by a sister, Murielle Laure Radcliffe, of Wokingham, England.

Elected 1965; Council 1975–78; Committees: Membership IV 1973–75; Moe Prize 1983–95; Nomination of Officers 1977–78; Research 1967–79; consultant 1982–88

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