

Women's Institute

History of Mary Stewart Collect

For many years, women's clubs in Canada, United States, Britain and other countries have used a prayer for the opening or closing ceremonies of their meetings. Sometimes it is simply read by one member, at others it is repeated in unison by all those present. They have usually called it Our Creed or The Club Women's Creed and as such it is widely known and popular on this continent, especially in small towns and rural districts. Widespread usage has resulted in some changes. The author gave it a title: _____ when it first appeared in an obscure corner of a well known American magazine.

Mary Stewart wrote the prayer in 1904, while she was principle of Longmont high school in Colorado. We are indebted to a Canadian woman, the late Mrs. Alfred Watt, M.B.E., for a true and correct version of the prayer, as here presented, and a little of the author's own personal story. Mrs. Watt came back to Canada in 1939 to attend and speak at the eleventh biennial conference of the Federated Women's Institutes of Canada in Edmonton. She it was, who had carried the Women's Institute idea to Britain and later became president of the Associated Country Women of the World.

Mary Stewart, while visiting in England had spent some time with Mrs. Watt at her English home. Errors had crept into the various printings of the prayer, especially in the first and second-last lines. These errors marred the beauty of expression and the clarity of thought of this prayer. The author

expressed concern about the garbled versions which were being circulated. In the studio of Robin Watt, the artist son of Mrs. Alfred Watt, Miss Stewart personally supervised his work of copying out the prayer, down even to fine points of placing a comma or a period. Reproduced here is Robin Watt's copy done by hand, under Mary Stewart's close supervision. The title, it should be noted is set in type, to identify it.

"It was written as a prayer for the day. I called it a _____ because I felt that women working together with wide interests for large ends was a new thing under the sun and that, perhaps they had need for special petition and meditation of their own. This must have been true for the Collect has found its way about the world, especially wherever English speaking women get together. Indeed it has been reprinted in many forms in many lands."

It was officially adopted by National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, meeting at their second convention on 1920, at St. Paul. It was read into the printed records of the Congress of the United States by Senator Tobey of New Hampshire, at the closing session in 1949.

Mary Stewart held a number of special teaching posts in Colorado and Montana. In 1921 she became a junior guidance and placement officer in the pioneer period of U.S. employment services. She continued to write for American newspapers and magazines. Her Alma Mater, the University of Colorado, in 1927 conferred upon her an honorary degree in recognition of her distinguished work in education, social and civic service.