History Of The Round Table

Eugenia W. Stone

Publication of

Tift Alumnae Association
Tift College, Forsyth, Georgia
Preface

For more than a generation the leadership and setting of Tift's beloved Round Table ceremony remained unchanged, but in 1967 the inevitable changes came. There was concern even for the preservation of this beautiful and best-loved Tift tradition. For it was then that Miss Eugenia Stone, after more than thirty-five years as the devoted composer and director of the Round Table ceremony, retired and that the old dining hall with the old round table was abandoned. Yet in the fall with new leadership and a new table the Round Table ceremony of the Class of '68 was conducted in the gymnasium with dignity and beauty. With joyful relief we see that in the spirit of the ceremony itself "The old order changeth, yielding place to the new."

Many students and loyal alumnae expressed concern not only to preserve the deeply treasured ceremony through the change but also to record its unique history from its beginning. For the history we turned to Miss Stone who, more than anyone else, has been a vital part of it. Through her creative leadership she has nurtured its development and evolvement. Miss Stone graciously consented to write the history of the Tift Round Table.

We are deeply grateful to Miss Stone for this history... for the writing of it and for helping make it happen to so many of us!

The Alumnae Association is pleased to make it available. Proceeds will be credited to the Alumnae Fund.

Mildred Garrett Lipham '37
President, Tift Alumnae Association
1966 - 1968
Foreword

In 1965 the Alumnae approached me with the request that I write the history of Round Table of Tift College. Time did not permit until now (February 1968) when retirement has given a relief from pressures.

As well as my memory serves me I have recounted the growth and development of this ceremony, calling on many "old girls" for verification of certain facts. If I have missed the exact year of any addition to the program it has been unintentional. I am positive I have not erred in the general period.

As to my personal connection with Round Table---I was present as a freshman at the initial presentation in 1912. Back as a faculty member at Bessie Tift I have seen every enactment since the fall of 1927 except two when illness prevented. In the fall of 1930 the senior class of which I was an honorary member asked me to help them with their ceremony, and I gladly complied. For several years thereafter each fall, the seniors came to me with their request, "You helped last year's class with their Round Table. Will you please help us, too?" And so after several years I became "taken for granted," and in more recent years have received appointment as one of the yearly sponsors of the senior class to assist them with their functions.

It has been a terrific load but a deep and abiding joy to enter into this experience each year, to share in its growth, and to have a part in transmitting to each senior class the ideals which the founders of the ceremony wished for all Tift girls. The response of so many alumnae has made it eminently worthwhile.

This sketch in abridged form will appear as one chapter in the history of Tift College now in preparation.

Eugenia W. Stone
Composer and Director of Round Table Ceremony
November 1930 - November 1966

Round Table

Undoubtedly the Tift College tradition dearest to the heart of succeeding Senior classes and carrying most significance to all real Tift girls is the Round Table ceremony enacted each year by the Seniors on the night before their Investiture. Underneath its pomp and ceremony it serves as an initiation of the Senior Class into the select fraternity of idealism which Tift College upholds and which it expects of its campus leaders.

In a court setting amid shields and banners ablaze with devices of heraldry, and to the accompaniment of soul stirring music, the candidates for knighthood, and their ladies, in colorful costume, take their places at the Round Table. Then follow the members of the Inner Court, Mage Merlin, the mystic Lady-of-the-Lake, the three Queens: Faith, Hope, and Love - each has a high place in the symbolism of the occasion. Announced by heralds and flanked by bodyguards, King Arthur (the president of the senior class) then enters and proceeds to his coronation. Crowned and counseled by Merlin, presented with his mighty weapon, the jeweled Excalibur, by the Lady-of-the-Lake, he ascends his throne and there establishes the Order of the Table Round, receiving from his followers the oath of loyalty to its ideals.

There is a solemn hush throughout the hall as their words ring clear:

We pledge
"To reverence the King as if he were our conscience
And our conscience as our King,
To ride abroad redressing human wrong,
To speak no slander, no, nor listen to it,
To honor our own word as if our God's,
To lead sweet lives in purest chastity."

The knighting ceremony then ensues, focusing attention on a genuine high light of the evening as individual traits of character in passing review are brought for a moment under the spotlight of recognition. The fire of Lancelot, the meekness of Percival, the faithfulness of Bedivere - these and all the others receive the plaudits of King Arthur and the assembly.

But the knights with all of their loyalty do not meet the King’s complete need. Lancelot is sent to escort Guinevere to the throne where she is lifted to a place beside Arthur to crown his life with love.

Shortly thereafter there is heard a cry which silences the conversation taking place about the banquet table! Sir Galahad, the True of Heart, startles the assembly with his intensity as he proclaims, "But I, Sir Arthur,
saw the Holy Grail." Then, as darkness suddenly envelops the hall the Grail shines out blood red above the King — and in the darkness is heard the song:

"To the knights in the days of old
Came a vision of Holy Grail.

Follow, follow, follow the Gleam
Of the chalice that is the Grail."

The pageant is over in forty-five minutes to an hour, but the impression of it lasts throughout a lifetime with the graduates of Tift; and those who have traveled distances to see it, carry the memory back to a work-a-day world, grateful that in a hoyden day there is still a place, there still are people who hold aloft ideals.

So much for the picture of Round Table! In recounting the story of the development of this tradition it is needful to say that several classes shortly after the turn of the century had a Senior Class Table in the dining hall. The Class of 1906 still has on record its choosing of the two tables formerly presided over by the Reverend Luther Rice Hogan, honored teacher of Bible and Latin, and Miss Daisy Dean Gray, Lady Principal, to form their Senior Table; and its willing this table to succeeding senior classes to be used exclusively by them during the Spring of their Senior year. It is easily conceivable that some succeeding class may have used a table shaped round, as one or two people have claimed.

But the Round Table as an enactment of the Arthurian legends was established by the class of 1913 in the fall of its senior year. Pearl Todd, the President of this class, would be the first to want her classmates, especially Nancy McBrayer, to share in the honor of having conceived of applying the idealism of the Idylls of the King to the spirit of unity and the establishing of a high code of conduct they wished for themselves and those who would follow after them. The first ceremony that fall night in 1912 was a simple one as most beginnings are. This is a fact implicit in the word, the idea of growth. The Vice President of the class, a large girl, portrayed King Arthur and the President of the class, a very small girl, had the role of the Queen. All other class members wore long white Grecian robes. To stirring music they entered the dining hall and there just inside the doors while everyone in the room stood at attention, King Arthur formally dedicated the Table Round to his Queen and her ladies, and they in turn took the pledge of worthy living which was to become traditional for Seniors of our College. Then the 25 members of the Class and their beloved Lady Principal, Miss Evie Campbell, went to the rear of the dining hall and were...
seated at their Round Table. This first table, as its ceremony, was an unpretentious object: a solid round affair made in halves fitted together and resting upon wooden horses. It was the spirit of the participants that made it an Occasion to Remember.

At Class Day during Commencement Week in 1913 that Senior Class willed to its Sophomore sisters its most prized possession, the Round Table. And so for several years this ceremony was enacted every other year as the Round Table passed to the Classes of 1915, 1917, 1919, 1921 and 1923, alternating classes for this little while using a crescent shaped table but with no significant ritual for literature had not furnished one for them. But after 1923 it was realized that this tradition had grown beyond the limits of certain classes and should represent the code and be the privilege and responsibility of all Seniors of Bessie Tift. To that end, the class of 1924, made history in adopting Round Table as an annual affair. Perhaps it should be stated that the Round Table as used since then, being open in the center, more nearly resembles the crescent shaped table than the solid original Round Table.

The seed planted by the Class of 1913 was germinating and little by little from year to year the ceremony was beginning to grow. One year Sophomore heralds appeared to announce the arrival of the King; another year came body guards. In the fall of 1925, the class of 1926 added the impressive feature of the Holy Grail which shone out in the suddenly darkened hall as the Seniors sang

"To the knights in the days of old
Keeping watch on the mountain height
Came a vision of Holy Grail
And a voice through the waking night,
Follow, follow, follow the gleam,
Banners unfurled o'er all the world
Follow, follow, follow the gleam
Of the chalice that is the Grail!
And ye who would serve the King
And loyally Him obey
In the consecrate silence know
That the challenge still holds today.
Follow, follow, follow the gleam
Standards of worth o'er all the earth
Follow, follow, follow the gleam
Of the light that shall bring the dawn."

In the fall of 1927 Merlin joined the procession though for two or three years an academic robe and mortarboard were used as a fitting costume for Wisdom. A year after Merlin, the Lady-of-the-Lake was the next character added.

The innovation introduced by the Class of 1928 was the pairing of the class members as knights and ladies in costume. This was a radical change from the wearing of their own evening dresses as had been the custom for several years. In matching colors each couple entered as the lady in appropriate dress; the knight wearing knee pants, an overblouse, and a knee length cape swinging free from the shoulders. The members of this class felt they had achieved the ultimate when Dr. Chamlee, the President of the College, finally though reluctantly agreed to allow them to wear knee pants! They had won his consent but his unbending dignity that night showed they had not won his approval.

In the fall of 1930, the Senior Class of 1931, Virginia Slaughter President, had an extra member after they had paired their knights and ladies. What should they do? So back to the Idylls they went for closer study and the three Graces: Faith, Hope, and Love graced their presentation. So much did they add to the spirit as well as beauty of the occasion they could never be omitted thereafter! Two years later the class of 1933, Louise Waldrep President, found itself in the same position extra persons. Again there was more study and Dubric, Chief Saint of the High Church of Britain made a very effective addition as he brought more emphasis to the coming of the Queen and with his blessing stressed the importance of the love she represents in the activities of Arthur, the human soul.

While some classes sought to develop the ceremony itself, others contributed to the physical properties and setting to create more deeply the atmosphere for the occasion. One class, that of 1932, was the only one since 1924 that elected not to present a Round Table. This was no discredit to them for the country was in the grip of the great depression and country, college, and individual parents were living in very straitened circumstances. Students felt humbly grateful that they were able to attend Bessie Tift at all. Since these were the years when each senior bore the expense of her own costume, no thoughtful girl, aware of parental sacrifice to keep her in school would consider imposing another five dollars' obligation upon them. And so Class of 1932 decided to forego a Round Table. But soon the outlook began to be a little brighter and so the classes resumed the tradition and began to continue their contributions to the properties which would heighten the effect of their respective ceremonies. Class 1935, Jeanette Wagnon President, made and gave trains for the King and Queen. No more would those costumes have to be rented from professional rental houses. Class
1937, Martha Giles, President, gave swords: individual knights' swords (prior to this for several years Knight Templars had lent their swords to the classes) and the jeweled Excalibur for the King’s use. An interesting anecdote connected with this sword occurred within the next few years— it is impossible to say just when. Tennyson in describing the dazzling beauty of this sword “that rose from out the bosom of the lake” says “on one side graven in the oldest tongue of all this world the words ‘Take Me,’ but turn the blade and ye shall see, and written in the speech ye speak yourselves, the words ‘Cast Me Away.’” One year just as the seniors were going into Round Table rehearsal there came to the campus a visitor from India. As he was speaking from the platform one morning, there flashed through someone’s mind the thought, “Sanskrit may not be the ‘oldest tongue of all this world,’ but it is the oldest we’ll ever be able to get here” — and so the visitor was approached immediately after his talk and he willingly wrote the Sanskrit for “Take Me.” The very next day this was painted on one side of Excalibur and on the other in Old English lettering the words “Cast Me Away.” A little thing? Yes, but one more detail to help authenticate the presentations.

In the fall of 1938 Florence Karsten a member of that Senior Class of 1939 painted in gold a back for the King’s throne featuring the “Dragon of the Great Pendragonship.”

It was the Class of 1940, Elizabeth Davison President, that changed the costumes of the knights from knee pants to tunics and these worn with the capes seemed more authentic for the period represented.

One year later the Class of 1941 grew interested in the heraldic devices of the different knights and one of their members, Elizabeth Caldwell who was gifted in art, made a large shield for each individual one with his device painted on it. These, ever since, with additional ones as the size of the classes has increased, have formed the setting around the banquet hall and have completely replaced the palms and other greenery formerly used. Of course the device on the shield had to be copied on the knight’s tunic and cape! The contribution of Class 1941 was definitely its art work.

The next year the Class of 1942 added these devices to banners of the knights and as they flanked the dais of the King they added a colorful touch to the scene.

The years of World War II, as had the great depression, brought two distinct problems that had to be worked out by the seniors. It was the Class of 1943 on which fell the brunt of economic strain and the Senior Class, Minnie Lou Lanier President, was so small it would have had a very slim
procession to its Round Table had its members, after the naming of the Inner Court, been paired as knights and ladies. To overcome this deficit a plan was devised which worked out beautifully but which aroused the criticism of many alumnae, loyal alumnae who jealously guarded their beloved tradition. When an explanation of what actually occurred was given, however, all opposition seemed to melt away. Because there were so few in the class, each member outside of the Inner Court was a knight and entered from the main dining hall door. Seated on an arranged balcony and under a canopy of red and gold, there just inside the door sat Sophomore "ladies." Each in turn went to the door as her knight entered, gave him her token and as he proceeded alone to the Round Table she returned to her place on the balcony. The Alumnae got the impression that Sophomores had eaten at the Round Table!! As soon as they learned this was not the case and that the Sophomores had simply sped their knights to the Table all was understood and forgiven.

A second problem of the War years was that materials available for costumes grew less and less, and the members of one class realizing that there could be no Round Table the next year unless they left their costumes with the college, instead of keeping them as heretofore, gladly gave them. These have been the nucleus for costumes used every year since. Of course some few have to be added each year as the size of the classes has increased or as individual needs have demanded. The current robes worn by the King and Queen, by Merlin and Dubric have been the contribution of the Class of 1954. Other classes have left other items: Class of 1949 gave the more permanent shields for the bodyguards (and on the back of each are written the names of the bearers year after year); the Class of 1951 through Dam Windham's efforts left the gilded trumpets for the heralds; another class presented the symbols for the Graces: the helmet of hope, the shield of faith, the breastplate of love —— carrying out the description of the Christian armor as found in First Thessalonians 5:8 and Ephesians 6:13-17. Especial mention should be made of the "stained glass window" designed and made by Mary Dean Moon and Lucile Groves of the Class of 1950 —— the window used behind the throne each year depicting the arm "that rose from out the bosom of the lake" extending the sword Excalibur. This intricate and truly artistic window was thought up and worked out by these two girls who on its completion revealed it as their surprise gift.

From year to year, bit by bit, spoken parts have been added to the ceremony: Lancelot's proud recognition of his King, the spirited acclamation of the entire assembly, the Lady-of-the-Lake's explanation of the worth and purpose of Excalibur as she offers it to the King, Dubric's blessing of the

King and Queen, the ringing words of Galahad as he sees the Grail, Merlin's impressive words descriptive of the crown

"No magic in a crown,
Instead the weight of it;
The royal stately dignity of it,
But the responsibility of it;
The wealth and beauty of it,
But oh the duty of it;
The mighty power of it —
Alas the fleeting hour of it!!"

These words by way of parenthesis were written shortly after the Coronation of Elizabeth II of England and along with several technical suggestions gained from that event showed the many influences that have prompted improvement or enlargement of the Round Table ceremony.

A major change that has been reserved until this point takes the reader back to the class of 1944, Claire Williamson, President, when all the individual knights —— not just Lancelot and Galahad —— had names and were dubbed each in turn for some quality of character. This of course lengthened the ceremony greatly but it did far more than that! To have the King see in the individual some quality of character deserving his commendation, to have that trait adjudged worthy of knighthood and so for a brief moment occupy the limelight, to receive from the King a personal challenge to worthier living —— all this has heightened the role of the class member and has given a sense of added significance of his own part in this class activity. Fragments of the dubbing come hauntingly to mind:

"Hold thy primacy as Heaven's high gift."
"Be thou faithful yet while life shall last."
"As in thy very bearing thou seemest knight
So be thou in thy heart."
"God make thee good as thou art beautiful."
"May strength of soul and stainless honor, Sir,
Be ever the twin wings that lift thee up
Above the sordidness of all our little world."

And then the gripping last one:

"Knight and Ambassador I name thee
And at thy dubbing give to thee this ring;
Go wherever Arthur's Court may need a spokesman,
Always remember that you represent a king!!"
New challenges added every year have comprised much of the change in recent years.

To match the increased importance of the Knights, a next addition was the King's recognition of the Ladies of the Court and the significant place they fill as the inspiration of all chivalry. Every person participating in Round Table must feel himself, herself an integral part of the ceremony - even though the King bears the great burden of the ritual.

At each Round Table enactment the impressive words are uttered by the King,

"The old order changeth, yielding place to new
And God fulfills Himself in many ways."

And each new cast of Round Table feels the import of these words as the tradition passes to them, receives their own impress, and in turn is to be transmitted by them to those who will follow.

It was the Class of 1962 that made a tape recording of its ceremony, as conducted by its president, Gloria Raney. The Class of 1947, Emily Holmes President, and others had left pictures.

In the fall of 1966, the Class of 1967, Joanne Doore, President, was fully aware that it would be the last class to have its Round Table in the old dining hall. A year later, the Class of 1968, Johnnie Ann Burgess, President, truly felt that "the old order" had really changed. The dining hall in Tift dormitory was a thing of the past. The new cafeteria, Rutland Hall, no matter how beautiful was not suitable for the ceremony so the Round Table was presented very pleasingly in the Physical Education Building, Vinzant Hall. Of course the banquet that had followed the ceremony since its inception had to be dispensed with, but a stately recessional brought the program to a fitting and dignified close.

A second mark of the changing of "the old order" was the use this same year of a beautiful new Round Table, custom built, the gift of the Alumnae Association. Made in sections enabling it to be enlarged as the size of future classes may demand, it bespeaks the interest of all Alumnae in the preservation of this best loved of Tift traditions.

Another item connected with this same class of 1968 that deserves mention is that one of its members, Mrs. Harry Allen of Forsyth, after participating in the ritual herself wrote to Warner Brothers of the Motion Picture Industry who had produced the picture Camelot. After explaining to them what Round Table is on Tift Campus and what effect it has on those involved in its presentation, she asked for some memento from Camelot for the Tift ceremony. To the delight of the Seniors of 1968 and especially of
the Class of 1969 who will first use it, Warner Brothers has sent to the Tift Campus the sword of Lancelot as used by them in their moving picture version.

One last word in the form of a tribute is in order. The brilliance of Miss Dora Brinson's music set the tone of greatness for the ceremonies from 1912 - 1946 when she retired; the same sort of masterful music on the organ by Mr. Charles Dirr since 1961 has been an inestimable contribution to the program. Miss Betty Stacey who for several years had given the benefit of her assistance and advice in the technique of the production, became the director in the fall of 1967.

Thus has the Tift Round Table evolved since November 1912, but whether the ceremony was short or long, a gala affair or a pageant full of meaning and deep significance the underlying symbolism of Tennyson is the unchanging value in each presentation:

- King Arthur ... The Human Soul
- Merlin ... Wisdom
- Lady-of-the-Lake ... The Church which offers the sharpest weapon (Excalibur) against the evils of the world
- Faith
- Hope ... The three friends of Arthur to help him at his need
- Love
- The Table Round ... the Passions and Capacities of Man