

VIOLET BARBOUR

1884 – 1968

Violet Barbour was a member of the department of history at Vassar from 1914 until her retirement in 1950. Those who knew her best remember her for her combination of intellectual toughness and personal delicacy. One of her students has described her as "just slightly Jane Austen, though at the same time New Yorker chic." To her friends she was warmhearted, witty, and stimulating. To everyone she was kind, though her charity towards a person did not necessarily extend to his opinions. She had wide interests, ranging from civic matters to sport. To the end of her life she was an ardent baseball fan and would regularly journey with friends to Brooklyn to watch and cheer the Dodgers; reluctantly, she transferred her devotion to the Mets when the Dodgers moved west.

But Miss Barbour's overwhelming passion was scholarship. As an undergraduate at Cornell University, her interest centered in history, enriched by the social sciences and literature. Cornell, where she continued through the Ph.D., acknowledged her intellectual prowess with both undergraduate and graduate fellowships. Recognition of this kind was to continue through many years in the form of prizes, awards, and other honors. Her first book, *Henry Bennet, Earl of Arlington*, was awarded the Herbert Baxter Adams prize by the American Historical Association in 1913, and remains the standard authority on the subject. She was the first woman ever to receive a Guggenheim fellowship, in 1925. B She was elected a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society in England, and later, when her interest in the seventeenth century broadened to include Dutch history, was given honorary membership in the Historische Genootschap, a distinction B rarely granted to foreign scholars. Her *Capitalism in Amsterdam in the Seventeenth Century*, published in 1950, has since, as Miss Barbour herself once put it, acquired "the dignity of paperbackery"; more significantly, it is used to introduce students at the University of Amsterdam to their own economic history. Her many articles in professional journals in America, England, and The Netherlands have made her as well known abroad as she is in this country. Indeed, one of her Vassar colleagues once had difficulty correcting an English scholar who spoke of Violet Barbour as "one of the most distinguished of our English women historians."

VIOLET BARBOUR (Continued)

Teaching provided a further arena for Miss Barbour's skills. She delighted in intellectual sparring, in challenging and being challenged by her students. Her original mode of expression, personal warmth, and infectious humor found full play in the classroom. She was shy by nature, but lost her shyness when she found

herself, as she once remarked, "facing a group of freshmen more frightened than I was." She was, however, a teacher not for the many, but for the few, though she tried to help the many if they sought her help. For intellectually gifted students, she was the teacher and they remained her friends for life. One has recently recalled the "discussing, pondering, and questioning" that was continually underway in her classes, the "excitement," and the "great good humor." Another student, herself a well-known historian, wrote: "Her style was beautiful, her vocabulary also, but always so underplayed that it took a sharp ear to hear what she was saying . . . she was a mistress of irony, but . . . a kindly irony, not the usual sharp and cutting academic skepticism . . . Tough and delicate. You'd think she must be spared, but . . . she never spared you, to your ultimate improvement and growth. I left Vassar knowing how immeasurably I had been changed by her --in every way."

Miss Barbour did not talk a great deal in faculty meetings, but strong convictions on important matters would bring her to her feet. Her concern with educational policy was genuine and based on thoughtful study. In connection with our current re-examination of the curriculum, it may be of interest that in 1925 Violet Barbour was arguing for: "A realization of the coherence, the dimly seen unity of knowledge, instead of the isolation by which academic departments guard their autonomy. "Scholars," she wrote, "should always be trespassing upon one another, always making peaceful forays into one another's territory to learn what is afoot there and bring the news to astound the folk at home." She believed that "a general plan of education valid for each and all" would always elude, but "if knowledge is not to fall into complete incoherence and our horizons collapse on our heads, the liaisons between studies must be developed and strengthened."

VIOLET BARBOUR (Continued)

Miss Barbour's broad interests and sympathies found expression in her scholarly work in a discipline which she found neither narrow nor confining. Referring to a piece of her own research, she once wrote: "the project is not one of earth-shaking importance, but it has a great deal of human nature knocking about in it and I find it quite absorbing." Hers was the kind of scholarship which combined imagination, sympathy, and perspective.

Mildred Campbell

Donald Olsen

Rhoda Rappaport