

## MEMORIAL MINUTE

### ACHSA MABEL BEAN 1900 - 1975

Achsa Bean was a member of the Vassar faculty from 1938 until her retirement, as College Physician and Professor of Hygiene, in 1963. She was a down-easter, born and bred, and retired to the house she and her life-long friend, Dr. Barbara Stimpson, had designed and built in Owl's Head, Maine. She died there in March 1975.

Her life was unusually rich and varied. She was a fearless woman, not afraid to tackle anything, and part of that surely came from her upbringing in Maine. She took her B.A. and M.A. at the University of Maine, but she had to interrupt her course of study to earn money; so she taught at the Kennebunkport High School and ran the town library. She spent six years on the University's faculty as Assistant Professor of Zoology and Dean of Women - stepping-stones to her on the way to realizing her determination to become a physician. She finally was able to begin the study of medicine at Radcliffe College and completed her M.D. at the University of Rochester. She came to Vassar in 1938 as Assistant Physician and Assistant Professor of Health and Hygiene.

Three years later, in 1941, she answered the call of the Red Cross for volunteers to care for civilian and military casualties in England. There she stayed until late 1942, having been sworn into the British Army Medical Corps as a lieutenant, one of the first two American women doctors to serve in that corps. (The other was Dr. Stimpson, her old friend, who later practiced in Poughkeepsie as a distinguished orthopedic surgeon.) She served in various military hospitals and as a member of the honorary staff of the Royal Free Hospital in London. This was the year of the blitz and she was frequently under fire; in fact she was bombed out of her house in London: as she used to say, with some nostalgia, just as she was heading for the luxury of a rarely come by deep bath, the bathroom was blown up. She had been promoted to major's rank before she returned, briefly, to Vassar - coming back because, she said, she "wanted to play on the home team". In early 1943 she became one of the first women physicians to join the Women's Reserve of the U.S. Navy, and was one of the first WAVES to be ordered overseas. She was sent to Pearl Harbor as Senior Medical Officer for enlisted Waves in the 14th Naval District. Three years later, in 1946, she ended her naval career with the rank of Lieutenant Commander, and came back to Vassar as College Physician and Professor of Hygiene - to what must have seemed to her then a trivial series of illnesses and ailments.

Not that one would ever have known that from her. But those who worked closely with her could easily imagine it, for though she was infinitely patient, generous, and kind with the truly ill and truly disturbed - student, employee, faculty member - she gave notoriously short shrift to "gold-brickers". "I might just as well be down at the corner of Main and Market casting for bass" was one of her tart comments on the malingerer. Her no-nonsense approach

created a most bracing atmosphere around her and Baldwin House.

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In this she was helped by her physical presence: she was a woman built on a large scale and had a voice that could match it. She was impressive, not to say intimidating, without the uniform; with it, she must have seemed like a dreadnought to some poor Tommies and Waves. But behind all that facade was a most sensitive, perceptive, and warm human being, and an almost uncannily astute diagnostician. Among all her professional colleagues she was noted for that skill: in Poughkeepsie, in Rochester where she taught at the Medical College for many years, and at Columbia Presbyterian where she served one day a week in clinic all the years she was at Vassar. Among her most respectful and devoted students were a whole series of Vassar College physicians, psychiatrists, and administrators. Everything about Achsa Bean was on a large scale: herself, her hearty sense of humor, her gargantuan appetite. She loved people, dogs, music, flowers, food – in about that order. She had a splendid voice and for years was a prized and popular ham in Faculty shows. She was never without dogs and one of her most endearing traits to dog-lovers was that occasionally, as a rare privilege to a trusted friend, she would allow a dog to accompany the afflicted to Baldwin House. She was a green-thumb gardener and always had flowers about her, and she was a superb cook.

But most of all she loved people and she spent her life, in and out of her profession, serving them. In Poughkeepsie she worked on innumerable medical and hospital boards, the New York State and American College Health Associations, and many local committees. She was in demand as a speaker to local groups, where she defended, always in a fresh and lively fashion, such causes as the nursing profession, cancer research, planned parenthood, and understanding the adolescent. In Owl's Head, in her retirement, she was no less active: she was the local school doctor, a State Inspector of nursing homes, a consultant in Health and Welfare, a member of the town's Planning Board, and, to top it off, a Deaconess and member of the Music Committee of her Congregational Church.

Achsa Bean was a tough-fibred New Englander. She inherited ideals of loyalty and service and she gave her life to furthering them. In moments of crisis she reverted to the typical New England habit of understatement. Dr. Stimpson tells of her classic remark during the thick of a submarine attack on their voyage to England in 1941. Dr. Bean came down to her stateroom, she says, and gently but firmly roused her with the words: "Get up – I think we're having an incident".

Submarines, like other problems, were just the incidents of Achsa Bean's life.

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