

VASSAR COLLEGE
POUGHKEEPSIE - NEW YORK 12601

At a Meeting of the
Faculty of Vassar College
held

April 6, 1988
the following Memorial for
John Aldrich Christie, 1920-1987,
was unanimously adopted:

When John Aldrich Christie died last September, he was where he wanted to be—at his home in Vermont with his family. Born in Northampton, Massachusetts—the son of a Congregational minister—and reared in Connecticut and southern Vermont, John was an inveterate New Englander. Away at college in Oberlin, Ohio, he read Henry James's Roderick Hudson as a cure for homesickness. He returned to New England to earn two M.A.s, the first at Wesleyan and the second at Yale. In January 1946, as he was fond of saying, Helen Lockwood "plucked him out of Yale" to teach at Vassar. He liked being close to Vermont. He jokingly told friends that he had wanted this written into his Vassar contract: in the spring, during maple sugaring time, he would be permitted to leave for two weeks in Vermont.

John received his doctorate in English and American literature from Duke in 1955. Four years later as a Vassar associate professor he was featured in a Pageant Magazine article entitled, "A Professor to Remember: What Makes a Dynamic Teacher?" The caption under one photograph read: "Rapt meeting of minds: Freshman class, teacher Christie, and poet Milton." With Yankee resignation and good humor, John characterized the article as "a spoonful for the educational cause." "While not stirring me to my professional toes," John wrote, it "does Vassar and teaching no harm."

In his courses on American literature John relished teaching that pantheon of New Englanders—Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, Emerson, and especially Henry David Thoreau who was the subject of John's book, Thoreau as World Traveler, published by Columbia University Press and the American Geographical Society in 1965. It was Thoreau's sense of the adventurous relationship between observed and imaginative experience that stirred John's own sense of himself as a teacher and a person. The first principle of his teaching was always that knowledge is not knowledge until it is experienced on the pulse. To him, as to Thoreau, the individual experience was primary. "No matter how mild the human adventure," John once wrote, "it can be made inestimable" by what one imaginatively brings to it.

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John's appetite for the human adventure was hard to forget, reflected again in his love of maple sugaring. When one visited him, in Vermont, during sugaring, the air was full of the smell of simmering maple sap. Maple syrup was used on and in everything—toast, cereal, coffee, ice cream. The sheer energy and physical

capacity of the man drew comment, especially if one should also happen to notice he had only one arm. A fall from the rafters of a neighbor's Vermont barn when John was a boy had left his arm badly broken. Infection and the lack of penicillin led to its amputation. John never considered himself handicapped, and neither would anyone who ever saw him splitting logs. Once, as he and a friend approached a toll booth while John was driving, the friend realized that before he could help in any way John had gotten out his wallet, paid the toll, shifted gears, and was leaving the toll booth while simultaneously putting away his wallet and steering with his knees. "Well," the friend thought, "if John is doing it, it must be all right."

At Vassar John seemed to serve at one time or another on virtually every faculty committee on campus. He was president of the Faculty Club, when there was a faculty club, from 1947 to 1949. With his first wife Dorothy Sexton Christie, and their three sons, David, John, and Roderick, he brought visiting writers together with students and faculty in his home. In 1951 when he became a Cushing House Fellow, his family became the first faculty family to live in the dormitories. The classes of 1951 and 1963 chose him as their Class Advisor. For nine years he served as an officer in the American Association of University Professors, ranging from president of the Vassar chapter to member of the National Council. He was one of a three-man AAUP investigating team which in 1966 charged the trustees and administration of St. John's University in Jamaica, Queens, for violation of academic freedom in their dismissal of thirty-one professors. He enhanced Vassar's financial aid program by creating the position of student research assistant, initially training students himself and paying them out of his own pocket. When John joked about getting money for such projects, his friends could recognize his deft ability to poke sly verbal fun at himself or the institution he was so devoted to. When he was serving as a consultant to Nyack High School in the early sixties, he told Vassar he would need traveling expenses. "How much?" he was asked. "Between twenty and thirty dollars," he said. Then, John would say, "I got a check for twenty-one dollars."

John felt proudest of his contribution to multidisciplinary education at Vassar. From the time of his arrival at Vassar he was involved in what was then called the Related Studies Program in American Culture, a program which collapsed in the mid-1950s for lack of funding. In 1972, John was able to regenerate the program by successfully directing a portion of Helen Lockwood's bequest toward its financial support. As the first director of the

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multidisciplinary program in American Culture, John gave shape to many of the distinctive goals and innovative principles of team-teaching that now mark multidisciplinary education at Vassar. He saw the College as being at the forefront of this experiment in education, and twelve years after forming the Program, he saw "genuine multidisciplinary teaching" now quite "come-of-age" at

Vassar.

In the summer of 1977 John married Elizabeth Garrettson Warner and set off the following year for Greece where he taught as a Fulbright professor. He had previously made two extended trips to India, serving as a consultant to Indian universities on establishing graduate programs in American studies, and helping the University of Delhi establish India's first doctoral program in American literature. He also visited the University of Kyoto and lectured in northern India, Nepal, Italy, and England. His appetite for new experiences remained strong. When in India, he lived in old Delhi, not the protected atmosphere of New Delhi. In Greece he learned Greek.

It was in Greece that a melanoma was discovered on John's shoulder. He was subsequently given a fifty-fifty chance of surviving the year. Back in Poughkeepsie, a year later in 1980, his son Matthew was born. For the next five years he energetically continued teaching until he retired, on schedule, in 1985. After forty-nine years of service to Vassar, or thirty-nine and a half, as he reminded everyone at his retirement dinner—no detail is too small for a scholar, he once said—he moved to Vermont where he and Elizabeth shared their love for the details of life in the house they planned and built together. Visitors heard talk of books, maple sugaring, and music. He and Elizabeth had sung together in the Christ Episcopal Church choir, and John had sung in a Vassar group that sight-read madrigals. In one of the last photographs he is happily watching his son Matthew play the piano. His last gift to a colleague was a marvelous plastic bag to collect maple sap; his last advice, where to get another. His last letter, dictated in the hospital, was his response to another colleague's book, which he had just read in galleys. His last wish was to be at home with his family. "Our experiences tell us all," John once wrote, "we are the makers, the poets of our own experiences."

Respectfully submitted,

Frank Bergon, Chair

Susan Brisman

William Gifford