

At a Meeting of the
Faculty of Vassar College
held

October fifth, nineteen hundred
and eighty-three, the following
Memorial ,

was unanimously adopted:

Jonathan Charles Clark was born in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, on
June 18, 1941. He grew up in Vermont and in southern California where
he came to love the Pacific coast as he had the New England mountains.
As a boy in Vermont, he recalled catching perch with his hands by the
dam in the Pussumpsic River; and as a boy bodysurfing on the
California

beaches, he recalled yelling to a friend as they caught a wave
together

and rode to shore where Jon discovered that his fellow surfer was a
California sea lion. In a small apartment on Pacific beach, Jon's
mother

slept on the living room couch while Jon shared a bed with his step-
brother

At night he washed out the good pair of pants he had to wear to
school. He

never had very much money. His father had left his mother just before
Jon

was born, and his step-father was killed in the Second world war when
Jon

was still a child. when he was sixteen, his mother was committed to a
mental institution. After a brief stay with an uncle on a chicken farm
in the San Joaquin Valley—an event that left him with a distaste for
chicken the rest of his life—Jon returned to southern California where
he was on his own. He had his own apartment and went to La Jolla High
School where he was a brilliant student, especially in mathematics and
the sciences, and he was allowed to take a college chemistry course
with

Linus Pauling. He walked to San Diego to get a bicycle so he could
pedal

to Scripps Institution of Oceanography where he worked after school. He
played quarterback for La Jolla High, and when you looked at Jon's nose
you

saw the result of his clash with the bruisers of San Diego High who
went

on to become the bruisers of USC.

He received college scholarships to Harvard and Dartmouth» but
because Dartmouth offered more money, he said, "I couldn't afford not
to go to Dartmouth," So he was back in New England where he loved the
mountains and was on the college ski patrol. He liked to hitchhike to
Boston, but in other ways he felt out of place at Dartmouth. In his
sophomore year he walked off the campus without bothering to withdraw,
leaving behind four F's on his transcript. He joined the Army with the
expectation of being sent to the Monterey School of Languages, but

instead, he traveled as a member of the Chemical Corps. After his discharge, he was glad to be rid of the Army, and he claimed to have celebrated the fact by throwing his boots, fatigues, and everything else associated with the Army into the East River. In New York he worked in advertising layout for Life magazine, then as a cataloguer for the American Institute of Aeronautics, then as a clerk for Morgan Guarantee Trust. With his wife

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Judy he moved back to the west coast. While working as head of the sample department for the paper distributors of Blake, Moffat, and Towne, he began taking night courses at San Francisco State. Transferring to the University of California at Berkeley, he discovered his love of colonial American history and knew that he wanted to continue his studies at Yale with the historians he admired, Edmund S. Morgan and J. H. Hexter. Jon was graduated with honors from Berkeley and awarded a Danforth Graduate Fellowship. At Yale he won the Tew Prize as the best first-year graduate student in history and later the George Washington Egleston Prize for the best dissertation in American history. After a year as a Junior Fellow in History at the Newberry Library in Chicago, he began his teaching career at McGill University in Montreal. The following year, 1973, he arrived at Vassar with his wife Judy and his young daughter Hilary. From the moment of his appointment Jon was a popular and influential teacher of history at Vassar. Students flocked to courses in his special area of expertise—colonial America and the period of the ratification of the Constitution of the United States. But he soon displayed a firm control and versatility in other areas, including American legal history, Atlantic civilization in the early modern period, and historiography. Characteristically, in being a good teacher, Jon broke all the usual molds of good teaching; he laboriously wrote his lectures for each class down in the margins and read these lectures aloud to the students. But what would almost always have been a deadening approach became, in Jon's hands, an exciting and lively presentation. Generations of students confirmed that he was not just one of the best lecturers, but one of the best teachers in the department. To say that Jon "took an active part in Department affairs" hardly begins to describe how indispensable he was to his colleagues in

History.

He was one of the prime movers in the reform of the history curriculum in

1971-78, he played a crucial role in the design and teaching of an ambitious course in comparative cultures, and he took the lead in preparing a year-long course that satisfies the freshman reading and writing require-

ment. dudy and he were popular housefellows in Cushing for three years;

his chairmanship of the Committee on the Quality of Residential Life brought Perspective and imagination to a vexed area of campus life.

His

participation in the American Culture Program as advisor, teacher, and planner was much sought and appreciated.

These are only the obvious examples drawn from one area of Jon's concerns. In a larger sense, Jon was a living Resource Center for so many people both on and off the campus. When students or faculty or an administrative officer called for some statement of policy from the History Department, more often than not Jon would volunteer to produce the difficult first draft. Just as students gravitated towards Jon,

so,

too, did his fellow historians find him always willing to lay down a book

or a pencil and talk about anything from baseball to Puritanisms. It was

natural to ask Jon what the Puritans meant by "preparations" or how to explain Puritanism to non-Bible-reading students. But it was equally natural to discuss with him what to do about an undeserved traffic ticket, the Giant-Dodger playoff series in 1951, or the comparative merits of ale and beer. Jon never gave information; he shared it. Nor did he offer advice- he was far too unpretentious to do that. One always came

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away from a conversation with Jon feeling that one had learned a fact, picked up an idea to think about, collected a joke never to be forgotten. His desk piled high with papers, Jon was never too busy to undertake more work, or in a larger sense, to make Swift a sane and habitable place. One member of the Department says: "I remember that when I thanked Jon for anything, he would turn out the palm of his hand and reject the idea that he had done anything at all. But he helped all of us to be better teachers, scholars, and human beings." As his mentor, Edmund Morgan has said so well, "Jon Clark was a good historian for the same reason that he was so good a friend: he took other people seriously and took their striving seriously." He was attracted to the New England Puritans by their insistence that the world be made better than they ever expected it would be. The dominant concern in Jon's own scholarship was understanding the varied ways by which people try to reconcile their political ideals and ethical standards with the conflict in

interests and demands of everyday life. He began by asking whether the

framers of the United States Constitution may have meant what they said despite all the debunking of their motives in twentieth century historiography

Entitled in its most recent version, *That More Perfect Union*, Jon's dissertation foreshadowed all of his subsequent scholarship in the skill with which he revised received opinion without maligning his predecessors.

His first published essay demolished the myth of the consolidating "federalists" with wit, impeccable research, lucid presentation, and respect for the honest attempts at interpretation by others.

Jon saw his coming to Dutchess County as an ideal opportunity for testing in a more exact way a central conclusion of his dissertation--that political allegiances during the ratification controversy could not be explained by class or interest group. In shifting his attention from the macrocosm of political debate at the federal and state levels to the microcosm of political behavior in its full context in one locality, Jon had to use much more varied kinds of evidence, acquire new skills to deal with them, and acquaint himself with the rapidly developing literature on social history. A major contribution by itself was Jon's reconstruction of the complicated networks of personal relationships in Poughkeepsie based on family, shared religion, economic standing, and occupation. But Jon's aim in the essays which resulted from his research always was to illuminate the choices people faced and what we can learn from their "responses. No wonder his scholarship contributed so constantly and powerfully to his teaching. The best illustration is the recently-published booklet, *A Government to Form*, where Jon uses local events and figures to make intelligible a sophisticated analysis of political behavior during our Revolution.

In the summer of 1982 Jon embarked on a new, ambitious project, less than the explanation of the rise of the two-party system in England and America. He had just received a leave in the spring term of 1983 for that research, when on Sunday, January 30, he entered the hospital complaining of high fever and headache. His illness was diagnosed as endocarditis caused by *staphylococcus aureus*, and he quickly lost consciousness. A week later, on the morning of Monday, February 7, 1983, Jonathan Clark died at the age of forty-one.

Jon Clark was a scholar and teacher of several parts, but through his character ran two dominant traits: a sense of integrity and fierce

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independence on the one hand and a capacity for compassion and friendship on the other. That Jon was able to keep two traits unified in a single personality accounts for the apparent contradictions in his life and work: his tough-minded secular outlook balanced by an abiding interest in Puritan theology, his gruff, sardonic, sometimes earthy, wit, combined with caring for students and colleagues and deep love for wife and daughter, his contempt for unjust authority matched by

unstinting service to the Department of History and to Vassar.

Jonathan

Clark will be remembered as an intensely private man who gave generously

of himself to students and community, profession and College.

Respectfully submitted,

Frank Bergon

Clyde Griffen

Rhoda Rappaport

Benjamin G. Kohl, Chairman