

ELOISE ELLERY

1874 - 1958

At the time of her retirement in 1939, Professor Eloise Ellery had served Vassar College for thirty-nine years and had been associated with it for over fifty. Soon after her graduation from Vassar in the class of 1897 she had been recruited as an assistant in the Department of History by Professor Lucy Maynard Salmon, and on the completion of her graduate studies she returned to Vassar as instructor, rising by successive promotions to the rank of professor in 1916. Her colleagues recognized her fairness and good judgment by electing her to major committees. From 1910 to 1923 she acted as Faculty Secretary, and from 1923 to 1932 she was Chairman of the Department of History. She filled these posts conscientiously and effectively but the consuming interest in her life was the study and teaching of history, and it was as a teacher that she made a lasting impression upon Vassar College.

The factual record of her life is slight. Born in Rochester, N. Y., in 1874, Eloise Ellery was the only child of Frank M. and Mary Alida Alling Ellery. Her paternal grandfather came to America from Yorkshire, England. Her father, a rising member of the business community of Rochester, was to become secretary and later trustee of the Security Trust Company of that city. Miss Ellery attended the Rochester Free Academy and entered Vassar College as a freshman in 1893. Her life-long interest in history was touched off by the teaching of Professor Salmon. On receiving her A. B. degree in 1897, Miss Ellery entered the graduate School of Cornell University. Under the direction of Professor H. Morse Stephens, an authority on the history of the French Revolution, she concentrated on the period of the Convention and chose as her thesis subject the study of a leader of the Gironde, Brissot de Warville. Fellowships from Vassar, from Cornell, and from the Association of Collegiate Alumnae enabled her to complete work for the doctorate including a year of research in French archives and in the Bibliothdque Nationales. She received the degree of doctor of philosophy from Cornell in 1902. Her only diversion, travel, was closely related to her interest in history. She was a frequent, often solitary, and intrepid traveler in western Europe. In 1923-24 she joined her father in a trip around the world. This

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began formidably with a close-up of the Japanese earthquake, though not in the area of greatest danger. In Shanghai, through the cooperation of

Sophie Chen Zen, Vassar 1919, Miss Ellery met and talked with prominent leaders of Young China about the liberal reforms their party then hoped to set on foot. When the Saar Valley was the warmest political spot in Europe Miss Ellery went there to obtain first-hand information on that explosive issue. In 1936 she embarked on the Odyssey cruise, visiting historic cities on the Adriatic coast, the Aegean islands, and Asia Minor. She was planning a trip through South America when the second world war intervened.

She was fortunate in spending the years of her retirement near the campus in the homes of devoted friends and colleagues, first with Dean C. Mildred Thompson and later with Dr. Jane N. Baldwin. Her erect figure continued to be a familiar sight to the college community until within a few months of her death.

The testimony of alumnae who had the good fortune to study European history under her direction is in striking agreement as to the foundation of her success as a teacher. Said one who graduated in 1908: "Her genuineness was obvious. She was true in her own scholarship and true in her interest in her students--sparing no time or thought to understand their needs and be helpful" Later, when this same student was Miss Ellery's colleague in the Department of History: "I was struck by E.E.'s ability to stimulate each student to her best, at whatever grade of ability the student happened to be." Another alumna of the class of 1912 recalls that there was special life in Miss Ellery's classes. "E.E. had a kind of completeness of range and view of a culture that was fundamental to all the rest of her thinking . . . In discussion there was always freshness, point and light. . . It was especially through the long paper that E.E. drew out and expected to be expressed with thoroughness and polish the whole capacity of every student." Out of this effort came the student's realization of "toughness and delight of intellectual adventure." Her quiet assumption that every student would do her best is what most impressed a member of ELOISE ELLERY (Continued)

the class of 1919. To an alumna from the class of '23, she was an inspiring teacher, "not personally or through charm or magnetism, but because she embodied the world of the intellect, "the eager search for and love of knowledge and the utter impartiality and integrity of the true scholar." To a member of the class of 1939, the last year that Miss Ellery taught, the intellectual excitement of her classes is still vividly remembered.

Each meeting was a drama that involved every member of the group to the limits of her intellectual ability. The discussion was carefully but unobtrusively guided, within a framework of rigorous standards and respect for the contribution of each student. In the hands of Miss Ellery teaching was truly a creative art. Perhaps the best description of her impact on those she taught is that of a Chinese student: "her special gift is to open people's intellectual box, so to speak, and let its contents flow out in a beautiful abundance."

She was an exacting critic, impossible to deceive with simulated learning or irrelevant flights of rhetoric, but endlessly patient with conscientious students, tolerant, witty, and kind. There is no better example of these qualities than her exhortation to a careless student: Miss Blank, "When you hoist, hoist!" The class of 1913 dedicated their Vassarion to her as one "who during our college life, has kept before us a high ideal of constructive scholarship."

This ideal was pursued not only in the classroom and at the conference table but in a wide variety of activities. Through Miss Ellery's suggestions the great collections of sources available in print for the study of European history were acquired or augmented by the Vassar Library in order that students might have the illuminating experience of observing history as it had unfolded before contemporary eyes. Occasionally a class would stage, after intensive study of the sources, some notable historic incident, as the class in the French Revolution reenacted the Flight to Varennes, using Main Building as the Tuileries, which had in fact served Matthew Vassar's architect as a model. Or a stirring debate in the Estates General or the Convention would be presented with fire and fury in an arena in Rockefeller Hall. As faculty adviser to the Political Association Miss Ellery assisted student officers in organizing a model session of the League of Nations which was attended by some 200 delegates from 29 colleges and universities.

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Miss Ellery's students continued to be her students after graduation. When they returned to Vassar for reunions, or to enter daughters or even granddaughters they would seek her out to tell her what her teaching had meant to them, the rich record it had made on their thinking and living. Nor had Miss Ellery forgotten them. To those who were especially in need of counsel and encouragement she wrote long letters mindful of their interests and of the little or big things they would like to hear about. She labored

long over her letters to two alumnae living in Communist countries. She knew how eager they must be for news from the free world, but knew also that it must be communicated in a way that would not excite suspicion.

She had many friends, yet those who knew her best knew little of the years before she came to Vassar or of her inner life. She had an unassailable dignity and reserve. She appeared duly at parties and meetings and listened with amused tolerance to the small talk of campus intercourse, but she never chattered or gossiped. Her time was carefully hoarded for the long labor of conferences, for reading papers, and for keeping abreast of the literature bearing on her courses. Sunday mornings were devoted to periodical-reading in the Library. Lest this absorption in the art and labor of teaching give the impression that she was stiff, aloof, unsocial, it should be added that she was gracious and cordial in manner. She had in reserve a hoard of witty stories which mellowed with age. Her thoughtfulness in calling on new members of the faculty with assurance of welcome was gratefully appreciated by the newcomers. Her courtesy was unfailing. One of the waitresses at Alumnae House, and one of the nurses at the nursing home where her last days were spent, had exactly the same tribute for her: "She was a lady."

Beyond the gates of the college Professor Ellery's standing as a scholar was widely recognized. She expanded her doctoral dissertation into a full-length biography during her early years of teaching.

Brissot de Warville a Study in the History of the French Revolution, based on extensive study in French archives, was published in 1915 in a series commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the founding of the college.

It is still recognized as authoritative for an understanding of the role of the Girondin party in the ELOISE ELLERY (Continued)

Convention. But Miss Ellery's heart was in teaching, not in research and writing except as it bore on teaching. During several summers she attended the Institute of Politics at Williams College. She addressed various organizations on contemporary educational and political issues, and contributed articles and reviews to learned periodicals. From 1925 to 1931 she served as associate on the staff of Current History, her assignment being to provide brief monthly reviews of political developments in Italy, Spain and Portugal. She was a member of the American Historical Association and in 1915 served

on the important General Committee of that organization. She was a member of the Vassar chapter of Phi Beta Kappa.

In reply to a questionnaire circulated among Vassar alumnae in 1950, Miss Ellery replied to the question whether she would (or would not) choose Vassar if she were entering college then: "Knowing a good deal about Vassar and little of any other college (by personal connection) I am hardly qualified to make any comparative estimate. But after having had an almost unbroken connection with Vassar for over fifty years, I can say that I have always found here an atmosphere of democracy and freedom of speech."

This statement may well stand as Miss Ellery's leave-taking.

Respectfully submitted,

Violet Barbour

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