

CHRISTABEL FORSYTH FISKE

1869 - 1956

Every one of us who speaks of Christabel Forsyth Fiske, begins his narrative with, "I shall never forget." She was one of Vassar's great women. Her gallant figure crossed the campus as if under full sail, its course held true by her intense love of learning and her direct sense of life. She wrote a number of studies on Old English and German Medieval literatures, English modifications of Teutonic racial concepts, 16th century and romantic literature. She was cited by scholars for her knowledge of Milton. She was learned in languages and belonged to organizations devoted to their study: the American Dialect Society, the American Folk Lore Society, the Scandinavian Society, the Modern Language Association. Two of her works give the key to her quality. In her essay, *Homely Realism in Medieval German Literature* in *Vassar Medieval Studies* of 1923 she says of her findings, This thread of homespun is but a slender one... Or to change the metaphor - the plain, quaint little figure which in true medieval fashion has gradually become for me the personification of this intimate, homely phase of the German mind, has been very inconspicuous, lost continually among the mystical and romantic personages thronging fantastically or brilliantly the pages I have read. Such as it is, however, it is more in evidence, I think, than in most other medieval European literatures, and therefore not only intrinsically interesting, but also from the comparative point of view, at least suggestively significant. In her last book, *Epic Suggestions in the Imagery of the Waverley Novels*, published in 1940, she searched out the heroic element in Sir Walter Scott because, she says,

... it had been neglected in criticism in favor of the romantic... In the case of a man of Scott's caliber, the impact of him on the average intelligent mind should result in a moderately well-rounded.. conception of him as a great English writer.

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To have this "moderately well-rounded conception" required merely that one be aware of the relationships of one person and all society, nature, the traditions of language and literature, the range from the folk to the aristocrats, from the romantic to the heroic.

This search for fullness and balance made her a superb editor. To her Vassar owes the publication of Vassar Medieval Studies and the Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies, the most characteristic and original witness of our achievement in the liberal arts that has ever been published. Beyond writing; her own piece for the Vassar Medieval Studies, she edited the whole volume. Within the quiet, exact words of her preface one can see her in action. She speaks of many an illuminating talk with various colleagues whose work while primarily in classical or in modern fields, is in certain aspects of it closely connected with the period here dealt with... They have cooperated with us; and we have thus a book somewhat widely representative of outlook upon the Middle Ages.

The departments represented in the book were English, French, German, Folk Lore, History, Greek, Latin, Mathematics, Art, Music.

For fourteen years, 1926-1940, as she read the papers of Vassar's students submitted for the Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies, her sure judgment never flagged. Every meeting of the Committee of the Journal brought out the flashing sharpness of her critical faculties, and she could always put into a few words the gist of the virtues or weaknesses of an essay. She was always a teacher too while she was editing. She took infinite pains with the students who wrote these essays, especially when she felt the student had capacity to do distinguished work. She was more interested in helping them to develop their gifts than in passing judgment on their work. She insisted on the highest possible standards of writing and research, involving not only scholarship but also sensitive imagination.

From 1903-1940 generations of students came to life in her courses on the history of English literature, her seminar on Milton, her seminar on Language. Her classes

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were rich in scholarship, profound and illumined. Even students whose background was barren and whose idea of a college was dim, caught the light on the past and discovered that Old and Middle English told them about life.

"She taught me to write a critical paper," says one of her students thirty years later. 'So gently too. But I've never forgotten. She so quietly showed me that I needn't say ever thin but I must select. She showed me how to select the essentials."Patiently, without invading the personal dignity of her students

she taught them to write by singling out each one's exact difficulty or possibility. "I know exactly who you are," she said to a freshman who in her paper a few days before had tried to tell the elevated feeling about coming to college that had suddenly dawned on her the summer before. "Your face belongs to this paper." But when the faces were not alight because the students had not read the books, much less thought about them, she was known to slam her book down on the desk, announce "I don't think I want to see you today," and walk out of the room. The effect on their work was electric.

She was a friend and a presence on the campus. She knew who was devoted and who lived on the surface. When she trusted people, her greeting always invited them to enter a world of justice and truth in which she herself dwelt.

"When did you get the meaning of academic integrity?" she would ask a colleague for she was troubled about her students' slow recognition of plagiarism. "My brain is seething," she would say. "Do you know the difference between Plato and Neo-Platonism?" Or if she had a great tyranny of today on her mind or the sufferings of the war or the injustices of the Great Depression or the bitter fruit of prejudice, she would seize one who, she knew, cared too and with her eyes severe and flashing, would say, "Will you explain clearly to me in a paragraph what is the meaning of this and what is to be done about it?" Only by chance did one know that behind the darting questions and the seething mind was also the long, generous private list of contributions to many pioneering agencies struggling to right wrongs.

It worked the other way too. As you saw her coming out of the library daily, you would ask her about what in  
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Scott's imagery she had found today, and there would come clear, sparkling discourse about the workings of his poetical imagination and perhaps his whole plan for the afforestation of Scotland. She was always ready to share the freshness of experience. But like all original and poetic spirits amidst the worldly ones, she was a wayfarer.... Nevertheless the fact that she was going somewhere wonderful inspired the whole college. Her memory today renews our faith in the course.

Helen Drusilla Lockwood

Charles Griffin

Barbara Swain

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