

## MARTHA WARREN BECKWITH

1871 - 1959

Martha Warren Beckwith, Research Professor Emeritus of Folklore at Vassar College since 1938, died at her home in Berkeley, California, on January 28, 1959. Born in Wellesley Hills, Massachusetts, on January 19, 1871, Miss Beckwith spent her childhood in Hawaii ("the blessed islands," as Padraic Colum called them in his book dedicated to her) and early became interested in the folklore and folk tales of Polynesia, a field which she made her own after graduating from Mount Holyoke College in 1893 and taking a doctorate at Columbia University in 1912.

After teaching at Mount Holyoke, Elmira, and Smith, Martha Beckwith was Instructor of English at Vassar from 1909 to 1913. She joined the faculty again in 1920 as Research Professor on the Folklore Foundation and as Associate Professor of Comparative Literature, the latter title being dropped in 1929. Her chair as Research Professor of Folklore was probably unique in the history of American college education - and perhaps is even to this day. It was made possible by the generosity of a Mr. and Mrs. Alexander of Hawaii, was arranged by them anonymously through a lawyer so that even President MacCracken did not know the identity of the donors until after Miss Beckwith's retirement, and was given solely for Miss Beckwith. Even in this day of giving to colleges and universities by foundations we might remark this practice for serious consideration.

After her return to Vassar Martha Beckwith gradually built up courses in folklore, greatly encouraged by President MacCracken, who also raised funds for field work by Vassar students to collect folklore in Dutchess County. The Vassar College Folklore Foundation published fourteen numbers between 1922 and 1934 and of these the first ten have the subtitle, "Vassar College field work in folklore." Martha Beckwith wrote nine of these monographs, four of which were reprinted by the American Folklore Society; her students wrote the others, sometimes in collaboration with her. These studies and her other monographs ranged over a wide field, for in her several leaves of absence Martha Beckwith collected tales, riddles, and songs from Hawaii, Jamaica, Cuba, the Mandan and Hidatsa Sioux, and the Kwakiutl Indians. She published a translation of the Hawaiian romance of Laieikawai in 1918, an edition and translation of Kepelino's MARTHA WARREN BECKWITH (Continued)

Traditions of Hawaii in 1932, and six books of scholarship on folklore between 1924 and 1951. Three of these dealt with Jamaican folklore and tales, one with Mandan and Hidatsa myths and ceremonies, and two with Hawaiian mythology. The crown of these and of her scholarship is

The Kumulipo: A Hawaiian Creation Chant, which she translated, edited, and wrote a penetrating comment on, and which was published by the University of Chicago Press in 1951. Reviewing this book in the Journal of American Folk-lore, LXIV (1951), 429-432, Katharihe Luomala of the University of Hawaii described Miss Beckwith as "the author of several major works on Hawaiian mythology and its relationship to that of the rest of Polynesia" and said of the book, 'the publication of her translation is a milestone in Polynesian research, and for folklorists and anthropologists who wish to learn of Polynesian chants and their function in culture, this book on the most famous chant of all, is a fascinating introduction to the subject."

She was an inspiring teacher of the comparatively few students she recognized as promising, but she was no more interested in the average student than she was interested in the political and social problems of modern life. She had many warm friends, however, who appreciated her single-minded devotion to scholarship and her courage in the many difficulties of research in her chosen field. She was a charming and beautiful woman, the best type of Victorian lady and scholar.

John Peirce

Winifred Smith

Richard Brooks, Chairman

XV - 86