

At a Meeting of the
Faculty of Vassar College
held

November seventeenth, nineteen hundred
and seventy-six, the following
Memorial

was unanimously adopted:

Charles Carroll Griffin was born on May 24, 1902, in Tokyo, where his
father was Professor of Economics at the Imperial University. His
family

returned to the United States in 1913, settling in Westboro,
Massachusetts.

Charles attended Harvard, receiving his B.A. in 1922. Then, seeking
horizons

beyond the academic, he was off to South America for seven years, two
in

Argentina and five in Uruguay, 'in the employ of the National Cement
Company.

He returned home with an interest in Hispanic American culture and a
knowledge

of the Spanish language that were to last him the rest of his life.

Beginning

graduate work at Columbia, he also served as an instructor in Spanish
there in

1930. His next venture the following year was as a Research Associate
of the

Library of Congress, to go to Madrid, where, enrolling at the Centro
de Es-

tudios Históricos- at that time perhaps the most significant
concentration of

liberal intellectuals in the Republic—he supervised the transcription
of

historical documents in the Archives of Seville and Valladolid. The
next year

he was again at Columbia where in 1933 he was awarded the M.A.

Nineteen thirty-

four brought two important personal events: marriage to Jessica

Frances Jones,

a graduate of Reed College, and the acceptance of an instructorship in
history

at Vassar.

The early forties brought a period of great concern in the United
States

for closer relations with Latin America. Men who knew the field were
in demand,

and Charles Griffin was ready to supply the need. In 1940 he went as
exchange

professor to the Universidad Central in Caracas, Venezuela, the first
United

States citizen to serve under the program set up by the Buenos Aires

Convention

for International Cultural Relations. A letter written later by the Director of the university to our ambassador pointed out that "Dr. Griffin's lectures were the first ever given in a school of higher learning in Venezuela . . . regarding the discovery, the conquest and the colonization of North America." An article in a Venezuelan magazine in 1941 characterized him not as the typical "fat, red-faced North American", but as an aristocratic Castilian: until one heard his "slight Anglo-Saxon accent", one might have mistaken the tall, slender professor for a resident of Burgos or Segovia in a play by Lope de Vega or Calderbn. It might have added, "or a portrait by El Greco." Charles came back to Vassar in 1941, as associate professor; but was off again in February 1943 to the State Department in Washington, where he served as Assistant Chief of the Division of Liaison and Research in the Office of American Republics Affairs. He returned to Vassar in 1944, this time to a full-professorship. Charles served as visiting professor at many places including Columbia,

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Cornell, Harvard, Princeton, Wisconsin, and at the Universidad de Chile. But happily for Vassar he always returned here where his own course in South American history had entered the curriculum, a break-through in the tradition that most history offerings should deal with our European background and the United States. For years it was traditional that every member of the department should teach the one introductory course offered, a survey of European civilization. Charles later regaled his younger colleagues with accounts of his struggles to cope with "all those popes and emperors." Although most of his teaching at Vassar was in United States political and diplomatic history, his scholarly work lay entirely in Latin America. At intervals he represented the United States as forwarder of pan-American

affairs,
in Chile in 1950 and in Ecuador in 1959, in 1962 at the Salzburg
Seminar on
American Civilization, and as delegate to the Conference on
Contemporary Latin
American History at Bordeaux. He published four books on Latin
American history
(one with a Spanish translation, one written in Spanish and published
in Ca-
racas), and was contributing author to five others. (A selective
bibliography
is appended to this Minute.) In addition he contributed articles to
practical-
ly all the scholarly periodicals in his field, and also to the more
general
historical journals. His last major scholarly achievement was as
editor-in-
chief of Latin America: A Guide to Historical Literature (1971), the
first
inclusive bibliography in that field. His place as leader among Latin
American
historians was recognized first by appointment to the Board of Editors
of the
Hispanic American Historical Review, and as Managing Editor from 1950
to 1954.
In 1970 the Conference on Latin American History gave Charles its
"Distinguished
Service Award", in the form of a handsome plaque which,
characteristically, he
kept trying to hide from view.
Few of his colleagues or students at Vassar were aware of the extent
of
his scholarly activities or of his international reputation. "Charles
is such
a modest chap," wrote his chairman on one occasion, "that it is only
when one
digs it out of him that it becomes evident" how extensive his
achievements and
honors were. Self-doubt, humility, and an awareness of his own
frailties made
him wonderfully understanding of the anxieties of others, and made him
the
best of all people to turn to for sympathetic advice. Countless
colleagues,
friends, and students could say, with Sarah Gibson Blanding, ". . .
when things
got really tough I could always talk with Charles and knew without any
doubt
I was getting the best and most unbiased opinion possible. Of all my
colleagues

I counted on him the most."

At Vassar Charles served four terms as chairman of the history department.

For the last two years before his retirement in 1967 he was first Acting Dean of Faculty and then Dean of Faculty. He felt a deep commitment to the local community outside the college, and took an active part in politics.

Among other activities he served on the Dutchess County Committee of the Democratic Party and as Director of the Dutchess County Council on world Affairs. In

1968 he became the first Executive Director of the Associated Colleges of the

Mid-Hudson Area, and from 1968 to 1970 served on the Board of Trustees of the

Southeastern New York Library Resources Council. He was a member of the Board

of Trustees of Marist College, and in 1969 became secretary of the Board.

But it was as a member of this faculty that we knew Charles best. For him,

loyalty to Vassar was no mere catch-phrase, but involved him in genuine financial,

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and perhaps even professional sacrifice. He turned a deaf ear to offers to

return to the State Department at a salary far above anything Vassar could

give him. He did the same to other attractive offers from the Rockefeller

Foundation, Stanford, U.C.L.A., and Cornell because, to quote a letter from

his chairman to President Blanding, "of his interest in working at an institu-

tion in which he believed as heartily as he does believe in what we try to do

at Vassar." In February 1950 Miss Blanding wrote him while he was Visiting

Professor at the University of Wisconsin, enclosing a new contract, saying, "I

hope like fury you are going to feel like signing. We have missed you and . . .

have kept our fingers crossed wondering if Wisconsin was going to wean you away

from us. As you can see, we have jumped your salary . . . which I am sure is

not as much as Wisconsin could pay you [in fact, Vassar's new offer was only

two-thirds what Wisconsin was paying him], but is all we can stretch at the moment." Charles happily accepted the economic sacrifice and returned to Vassar. He, of course, would not have called it a sacrifice. He had abundant experience of great universities, and none of them gave him the intense intellectual and emotional satisfactions that Vassar did: students who delighted in and responded to his broad-ranging intellect and provocative, questioning teaching; colleagues who could be waylaid for speculative discussion or riotous argument; department, committee, and faculty meetings in which he could observe the wit and cantankerousness, wisdom and perversity, mental agility and abnormal psychology of his colleagues. He took affectionate delight in displays of institutional absurdity and human folly, which Vassar offered in prodigal abundance. Charles never forgot what it had been like to be a young, inexperienced instructor, ". . . Newer and younger [faculty] members . . . instinctively feel him to be their friend," his chairman once wrote. One of them later recalled: "I first knew Charles at a crucial time in my life—at the beginning of my career. He quickly became for me a kind of mentor, such as I had never in graduate school . . . By watching him in action in faculty meetings . . . talking to him at faculty tea, or simply chatting with him on an evening . . . I got some idea of what it meant to be a scholar, a teacher, and a man of integrity. Charles and I had our differences—we really were not very much alike—but his example for me was central to my life." Charles came to Vassar at a time when, as he recalled three decades later, "the college . . . was more self-contained than it is today." The Vassar community dominated the social as well as the professional lives of a large proportion of the faculty. Depending on their tastes, they used it as a vast salon in which to hammer out their ideas in friendly yet critical

company, as a stage on which to develop and display their eccentricities, or a kind of en-counter group in which to express their inner hostilities and aggressions. Charles did his best to maintain the notion of the faculty as an intellectual community even into the fifties and sixties, when outside at-factions, whether professional or personal, were drawing the attention of both faculty and student body away from the college. It was a mystery how Charles managed to produce the extraordinary bulk of his publications and pursue his professional activities on top of a heavy teaching load. For he always seemed to be found in the back parlor of Swift, in the Retreat, or at faculty tea, engaging in anecdote or argument, covering every

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subject under the sun. ". . . His intellectual curiosity was insatiable, as his fund of knowledge was almost fathomless," one colleague recalls.

". . . What I think of most in connection with him was not just his helpfulness and companionability," writes another, "but those glorious, continuous, shimmering days and nights we all had at Raymond Avenue. That for me was the Golden Age . . . we all belonged to Charles's extensive, amusing, and beautifully domestic-ated world."

Charles played an active role in Vassar politics, serving on most major committees, and as president of the local chapter of the A.A.U.P.; in the 1930's he was much involved with the Teachers' Union. He firmly believed in maintaining the authority of the faculty as a corporate body, and in seeing that the body exercised its powers wisely and responsibly. When Alan Simpson was inaugurated as President, Charles spoke in the name of the faculty. "The Faculty of Vassar College has never been a placid, harmonious body," he warned the new president. "Because of our nature as questioners, our training as critics, and

our diverse associations and interests we are likely to provide opposition as well as support to your endeavours."

Charles spoke often in faculty meetings, and one never could be sure in advance what stand he was going to take on an issue. while his commitment to basic principles--academic freedom, faculty power, individual liberties--never faltered, he embodied the definition of an intellectual as one who is continually and systematically questioning his own opinions. He belonged to no camp, and voted and acted as his conscience and intellect directed. Impressive as he was in faculty meeting, Charles was at his best in a small group, late at night. He delighted in the varieties of human nature, the intricacies of thought, and the techniques of politics. But above all he loved conversation. For him, as for Dr. Johnson, conversation offered the best alleviation for the pain of existence. It was his chief joy, a means of adding to his stock of knowledge, of encountering new ideas--the more subversive and heterodox the better--and of savouring the pleasures of articulate sociability.

Of colleagues in other disciplines he could ask a simple, sincere, and yet so basic a question that one found oneself rethinking ideas long taken for granted.

Charles was a moderate historical relativist, for whom the conviction that absolute certainty was an impossible ideal was not a depressing, but an exhilarating belief. For he enjoyed the process of debate more than he cared about the outcome. But while pragmatic and flexible in his approach both to questions of historical truth and educational policy, he never abandoned his moral convictions for the sake of expediency. Intensely sensitive to personal attacks, he acted according to his conscience as chairman, as dean, and as individual, never swerving from what he was convinced was his duty for the sake of popularity or a quiet life.

President Simpson has summed up the qualities for which we loved

Charles:

"A dearer man we never knew--gentleman, scholar, wit. I never saw him without thinking of the motto of New College, Oxford--'Manners makyth man'. He was . . . a model of good sense, good-heartedness, and fidelity. when I asked him for help he always replied that he would do anything for Vassar--and did so."

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Respectfully submitted,
Donald Olsen, Chairman
Mildred Campbell
Evaln Clark
Christine Havelock
Antonio Marquez

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Bibliographical Note

His publications include *The United States and the Disruption of the Spanish Empire, 1810-1822* (1937), *Latin America* (1944); *The National Period in the History of the New World* (1961, with Spanish translation in 1962), and *Los Temas Sociales y Economicos de la Época de la Independencia* (published in Caracas in 1961). He edited and contributed to *Concerning Latin American Culture* (1940), and contributed chapters to *Ensayos sobre la Historia del Nuevo Mundo* (Mexico, 1951), a commemorative volume in honor of Emeterio Santovenia (Habana, 1958), *Conocimiento y desconocimiento en las Americas* (1958), to vol. XI of the new edition of the *Cambridge Modern History on Latin America, 1870-1900* (1961), and to A.P. Whitaker, ed., *Latin America and the Enlightenment* (1961). In addition he contributed articles to the *Hispanic American Historical Review*, the *Maryland Historical Magazine*, the *Inter-American Quarterly*, *Revista de Historia de America*, *Boletin de la Academia de Historia* (Caracas), *Cahiers d'Histoire Mondiale*, and the *Venezuelan Revista Nacional de Cultura*. His last major scholarly achievement was to edit the bibliographical volume, commissioned by the Library of Congress, *Latin America: A Guide to Historical Literature* (1971).