

VASSAR COLLEGE

POUGHKEEPSIE - NEW YORK 12601

At a Meeting of the Faculty of Vassar College held October eighteenth, nineteen hundred and seventy-eight, the following Memorial was unanimously adopted:

J. HOWARD HOWSON, 1894-1978

When J. Howard Howson retired, in 1959, he had been Professor of Religion and Chairman of his Department for thirty years. He died in January of this year.

Born in Totonto, Canada, in 1894, he was reared in the Puritan tradition. He graduated from the University of Toronto in 1916. In 1917, he became an officer in the Northumberland Fusileers and began serving with the British Expeditionary Forces in France. He fought two years in frontline trenches without wound from shellfire but, just before the Armistice, was burned by gas. When released from the hospital, he returned to Canada and went West in search of an outdoor life. He dug coal in Alberta for nine hours a day and, at night, taught English to fellow miners. Then he worked on government lands in Northwest Canada.

He came to New York City in 1920, at age 26, to study at Union Theological Seminary. 1923 was a banner year: he received the B.D. degree, magna cum laude, from Union, and its Travelling Fellowship; Columbia Teachers College awarded him an M.A.; he was elected Fellow of the National Council for Religion in Higher Education; and he married Lillian Campbell. He taught at both Union and Teachers College for the next two years and then, for three, at Hamilton College. Howard Howson joined the Vassar faculty in 1929, on the Frederick Weyerhaeuser Chair. He created Religion 105, a course in which he introduced generations of Vassar students to scholarly study of the Judeo-Christian tradition. His course in the history of religions helped to pioneer Asian studies in the curriculum. He taught for years in the Vassar Summer Institute of Euthenics, on ethics and religion, adolescent psychology, and mental hygiene and the family. In the early nineteen forties, he taught summer courses in marriage at Michigan State. Later in the 'forties, the Rev. James A. Pike then Rector of Christ Episcopal Church, Poughkeepsie, publicly attacked his liberal approach to the study of religion.

That attack was not Mr. Howson's only link with the community. He belonged to the First Congregational Church, to the local chapter of the League for Industrial Democracy, and to the Dutchess County Society for Mental Health, in all of which he held elective office. After retiring from Vassar,

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he taught a course in religions of the world at Dutchess Community College.

His wife, Lillian, died in 1946. They had three children--John, Carol, and Christine--who grew up in the college community.

In 1947 he married Alice Guest, of the Department of English, later Study Counselor, who survives him. He spoke countless times in chapel, which then met daily. Francis White Field '36 has recalled that one clique of students attended day after day, so handsome was Mr. Howson, until they discovered that he was married. Then they dropped chapel. Mrs. Field also recalled this touch of his teaching: In 1932...it was still the custom to assign specific seats to new students in a classroom, at least until everyone got well acquainted. Being tall, and having a name that began with "W", I had spent my life so far at the end of the line or the back of the room. Not so in Howard's class. He had decreed that W, X, Y, Z should be in the front row. That is how my appreciation of him got off to such a good start. Howard Howson had a consideration for persons that was at once deep and unsentimental. Over the years, one member of the Vassar community after another turned to him for counsel. We close with some words of his own. They come from an address on "Academic Freedom" that he gave during the McCarthy era: Academic freedom involves much more than society's recognition of the role of the scholar as the re-examiner of our cultural heritage. Academic freedom involves society's legitimate expectation that the scholar as teacher will educate scholars as competent as himself, with an - integrity equal to his own, with independence of judgment ~ comparable to that he claims for himself. This means that he must create in his classes an atmosphere of mutual intellectual respect, in effect, a miniature scholarly society of students, under the guidance of the teacher. This involves the recognition of obligations on both sides. On the side of the teacher there must be a recognition of the student as a person in his own right. He is a creative person with his own aspirations, his own aptitudes and interests for which no apology need be made. He is no tabula rasa on which the teacher inscribes the truth as he knows it; no empty vessel waiting for the truth to be poured into him. if he is to be initiated into the society of scholars he must be treated in such a way that he has a growing respect for himself as a scholar. This means that he must learn that discipline of scholarship that will take him back to the living data of knowledge with tools that will enable him to distinguish the important from the trivial, the significant from -3- the insignificant, the more permanent from the ephemeral. the student is to think fearlessly, the scholar as teacher must acquaint him with points of view and conclusions other than the teacher's own in such a manner that he as student is free to accept other possibilities without any sense of disloyalty to his teacher or fear of censure by him. lf

the student is to think creatively, the scholar as teacher must be perceptive, and appreciate the significance to the student of efforts that may be pitifully faltering when compared with the assured strides of the mature scholar. This calls for humility in the very area of the scholar's sense of power.

Respectfully submitted,

Elizabeth M. Drouilhet

John H. Glasse

Edward R. Linner

October 18, 1978