

HELEN DRUSILLA LOCKWOOD

1891 - 1971

Helen Drusilla Lockwood, Professor Emeritus of English and from 1950 to 1956 Chairman of the Department, died in Seaford, Sussex, England, on March 27, 1971, at the age of seventy-nine. Miss Lockwood had retired from the college in 1956, after teaching here for twenty-nine years. Although for the last decade of her life she spent most of her time in England, she returned several times a year to Poughkeepsie, where she kept a residence; and she continued until her death to be interested in the affairs of the college and in the Poughkeepsie community. Her substantial gifts to Vassar's Center for Black Studies in 1969 and 1970, and her confidence that the program was likely to contribute to the whole community reminded those who knew her of her belief in the interlocking concerns of learning in the classroom and life outside.

Miss Lockwood was graduated from Vassar in 1912. She returned as a member of the faculty in 1927 after years of study, travel and teaching, which included a doctorate from Columbia in Comparative Literature and participation in several summer sessions of the Bryn Mawr School for Women in Industry. Her published dissertation was a study of French working men and the English Chartists in literature from 1830 to 1848.

Helen Lockwood had a lively sense of a tradition of great teaching at Vassar: a tradition of pioneering and originality. She wrote of an earlier faculty that was concerned not to copy other educational institutions but, and I quote "to recognize the needs of people and to meet them." If at its founding Vassar's first originality (recognizing the need of women to be educated) was "its classical curriculum designed to be equal to that of the best university in the country," the "standard of measurement" of these early leaders, she claimed, "was life itself. Maria Mitchell taking her students to Kansas to observe an eclipse of the sun in 1870 was no less characteristic than their reading Plato in Greek."

She believed, then, that there was a tradition to perpetuate here, and she perpetuated it in her own way.

HELEN DRUSILLA LOCKWOOD (Continued)

For her the great teacher of her student days was Lucy Maynard Salmon, the historian. "I cannot remember," Miss Lockwood wrote years later, "when Miss Salmon's realism was not a presence challenging all decisions." In 1937 she made a dream of Miss Salmon's come true in the Social Museum, which she initiated and directed until economy dictated its end in 1951. The museum was described as "drawing on many departments for direction in research and for scholarly substance, and on the community for raw materials" to produce exhibitions that were "creative exercises in the graphic representation of social facts."

Miss Lockwood's course in Public Discussion was announced in the Alumnae Quarterly in 1933 as a development in the Depart-

ment of English of its "tradition of social criticism and debate." The particular forerunners were the department's courses in Argumentation, which she had valued highly as a student. And there was her own enjoyable and impressive career in the extra-curricular debates that filled the old Assembly Hall in her student days. 1912's Vassarion had set against her name the lines: In arguing, the simple heat

Scorched both the slippers off his feet.

She liked, too, to think of this course, like the Poughkeepsie Forum in which she took part, as carrying on the American tradition of debate around the cracker barrels of country stores. In the new course there was an explicit shift from argument to an arrival at consensus. But, however steadily held as a goal of discussion, consensus was not a compulsion. A colleague has recalled from faculty meetings and committees that her "incessant and tireless wars against cant and nonsense were perpetual encouragements to those who were weaker and less energetic in battle." Old students, too, remember that conviction was not sacrificed to consensus.

In the teaching of literature and writing, her view of English as an art that begins in experience and gives form and vision to it was not unique in her department. But in the subjects she taught -- American Literature, Blake to Keats, The Contemporary Press -- her strong social interests gave a particular push to her efforts to bring her students to an understanding of the dynamics of a work of the imagination. An examination of language and its implications was, however, always essential to this activity, whether it be Wordsworth's great lines on the French Revolution, or the Declaration of Independence, or the students' own writing (where she declined to let them be satisfied with easy verbal skills). Her conduct of the coordinating
HELEN DRUSILLA LOCKWOOD (Continued)

seminar in American Culture made students press back to the roots of their generalizations through language. One of her favorite images was of the misguided student - or faculty member - jumping from abstraction to abstraction as from tree to tree. Problems of communicating in the modern world; language and imagination; the philosophy of free speech -- formed the context of writing and critical analysis in her famous course in The Contemporary Press, which she inaugurated two years after her arrival at Vassar and taught until her retirement. Miss Lockwood did not o'erleap the bounds of the discipline of English, as was sometimes charged; but in her urgency to connect it with large human concerns, she was bold to stretch them. An experimental course, Today's Cities, with New York there to study, probably came nearest to Helen Lockwood's conception of what Vassar should be doing. This course, offered by six departments, under her chairmanship, in 1945 and 1946 engaged the full academic time of its twenty freshmen during the third term of Vassar's wartime curriculum. One characteristic of the temper

of the post-war years as these teachers saw it was the growing impatience of young people with the gulf they experienced between the world of the classroom and the world without. Today's Cities, Miss Lockwood wrote, could lead them to "clearer conceptions of how the world works" and how poetry and sciences "when related to each other can illumine its struggles and help to direct them." Helen Lockwood was a stirring and memorable teacher. Coming from her, the not uncommon question, "Well, what's on your minds?" was bound to bring response, and then things began to happen. Sometimes a young woman regretted having revealed her mind's contents, knew at once that she could not, would not, arrive at consensus with Miss Lockwood, and went her way, perhaps never to forgive or forget. But for others the experience was tonic. And for many alumnae being in her courses was one of the great events of their college years. There are those who remember Blake to Keats or American Literature as giving them hours of rich, heightened awareness; they instigated the Faculty-Alumnae meetings to revive the experience. And there are those who took from her a measure for their lives (as Helen Lockwood did from Miss Salmon); and those who have counted on her for support as they worked out their crises in talk or letters.

Helen Lockwood sought vision and worth for her department as well as for students and for Vassar as a whole. Younger colleagues, sometimes very different from her in cast of mind and

HELEN DRUSILLA LOCKWOOD (Continued)

in feeling, often took something from her that enlarged their conceptions of teaching and strengthened their own individuality. Her extraordinary intellectual vitality and interest in the world endured to the end of her life, as did her faith in the development of the critical intelligence and its power to do good. This faith was expressed in the phrasing of her will where she wrote that, after certain bequests to friends and to public institutions in Poughkeepsie and elsewhere, she was leaving the "residue and remainder of her estate" to Vassar College without restriction, "with the hope that my interest in the quality of teaching and my concern with pioneering in the reinterpretation and deepening of a liberal education will be remembered."

Respectfully submitted,
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