

HENRY NOBLE MacCRACKEN

1880 – 1970

In his book of reminiscences, *The Hickory Limb*, President MacCracken calls the greatest gift to Vassar of his predecessor, President Taylor, "the group of really distinguished teachers he persuaded to come to its comfortable but sparsely furnished chairs." One can hardly define the single greatest gift to the college of President MacCracken himself, let alone describe the complex personality which was expressed in his various benefactions. But perhaps his overarching achievement here was to foster an academic community, one offering freedom, and governed increasingly by its citizens; a community dedicated to academic excellence and giving its students and faculty the opportunity to be, at the highest levels of imagination and critical thought, citizens of the world community. For him this was made possible not only by the faculty and the students but by the staff of employees, the Trustees, and the Alumnae. He came to Vassar a young man convinced that men should not govern women, and that the day of the benevolently despotic college president was gone. He discovered upon his arrival that the faculty was already on its way to self-government, and he supported his faculty in this. He had confidence in the increasing maturity of the students; his belief that they should have more say in their own education was reinforced by his study of the new free universities of Europe after the end of the first world war. It was with his help and encouragement that the powers and right of Trustees, faculty, and students were set down in the Academic Statute of 1923, the forerunner of our present governance.

He prized scholarship, but he saw it as including far more than a conventional study of the ordinary materials of learning. He found congenial the traditional Vassar emphasis upon the interconnections of the arts and social life, and of theory and practice in all fields; he strengthened this tradition. The college theatre was encouraged. New off-campus studies were set up, as were inter-departmental programs in the sciences and social sciences, some of them forerunners of our present environmental studies. He brought the college and the local community together, for he wanted the students to be, as he said, "citizens of the world, beginning with Poughkeepsie."

HENRY NOBLE MacCRACKEN (continued)

Good teaching and study were the center of all this. He sought in various ways to help the faculty teach better and to conduct the research and study necessary to this sort of depth and unity in education. Some of his methods were informal. A young instructor might tremble to be invited to join the Dean and the President in a faculty group called Pot Luck, but he had the opportunity to hear papers by his colleagues in various fields and to contribute his own research. The students too were encouraged to enlarge their views of

their situation; President MacCracken reminded them in chapel talks that they belonged to an old company of students going back to the mediaeval universities. During the two world wars that his administration saw, he showed them various ways in which they might serve society, one being by studying. The relationship between American students and teachers he saw as friendship in shared learning. He wrote: "The authority of the older person, based on experience and wider study, need not prevent the shared life, if it is held in reserve as needed, and if teacher and pupil are both of the community of scholars." He founded the Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies so that a larger scholarly world might read the works of our youngest scholars.

With President MacCracken's belief in community and inter-connection went the conviction -- natural to an American democrat, teacher of Chaucer and Shakespeare, and participant in the drama -- that human variety is a value to be cherished. In the college this meant his diffusion of his sense that all students should have an equal chance to develop, in their own way, whatever power they had. The standards were very high. The rewards were not external, nor was competition presented as the basis of motivation. It was a true kind of academic freedom, as he said and believed: the freedom to gain knowledge and self-respect.

Respectfully submitted,

Charles C. Griffin

Edward R. Linner

Caroline G. Mercer