

MARY EVELYN WELLS

1881 - 1965

Most of you present today never heard of Mary Evelyn Wells. Few of you knew her personally. Some of you remember her as a distinguished senior colleague, for you were but young instructors when she became Professor Emeritus of Mathematics in 1948. Yet Vassar College owes much of its present distinction to women such as Miss Wells.

Miss Wells was first and foremost a mathematician, "Euclidean in her approach to life," as one friend characterized her. Her presentation of mathematics had depth and was sound, with that nice blend of scholarliness and integrity that students are so quick to recognize. But it was something more; for in its own way it was a work of art -- the work of a master-teacher. How many of us, like Mary Wells, can so enthrall students that they do not hear the sound of the bell at the end of the class hour? Her gift of humor, fairmindedness and inexhaustible energy, her discretion, loyalty to colleagues, selflessness, sense of the "wholeness" of the Vassar community and what it worked for are the qualities that gained for her the respect and confidence of her colleagues and inevitably led to service on committee after committee.

As a long-time member of the Committee on Admission, Miss Wells was adamant in her rejection of candidates unfortunate enough to have acquired even one low score, whatever the field. To quote her:

"Vassar College is able to get students who can; why take those who can't?" President MacCracken comments that perhaps this was one of the times in which numbers really got in Miss Wells' way. Though a person of strong convictions, she was a firm believer in democratic processes. She fought for her beliefs, but when defeated, worked with equal vigor to uphold the decision of the majority.

Miss Wells came to Vassar College in 1915, the year in which President MacCracken was inaugurated. A graduate of Mount Holyoke, she held both the M.S. and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Chicago where she had worked under Professor E. H. Moore, a rare distinction for any young mathematician, especially a woman. She had already taught for five years at Mount Holyoke, and, as acting Associate Professor, for another year at Oberlin. She was, however, appointed to and accepted an instructorship at Vassar, a rank which she held for five years. At this time mathematics was a required course for freshmen, and Miss Wells

was assigned to teach six of these sections. Later promotions came rapidly for that era; at the age of forty-seven she became a full professor and served the college in this capacity for twenty more years.

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Along with her dedication to mathematics and to teaching, Miss Wells had interests beyond the confines of the campus. Perhaps her greatest enthusiasm outside Vassar was centered on India. In 1926, she was invited to the University of Madras as Head of the Department of Mathematics. This experience gave her a last-

ing love for that country and an awareness of its problems. She returned to Madras in 1936-37 and continued to serve actively as a trustee of the University long after her retirement from Vassar College. Almost certainly, it was only love for her family and sensitivity to their needs that kept her from going back to India. Indeed, her devotion to her family was marked throughout her life. A younger sister and lively nephews enjoyed many a summer at her home in Maine.

This, then, is the woman to whom we pause to pay tribute: a woman whose stern sense of devotion to her profession led her to great distinction as a mathematician and teacher; a person committed to the highest ideal of a Vassar education; and one whose dynamic influence still remains with many associates and students.

Mildred Campbell

Edward Linner

Mary Sague

Winifred Asprey, Chairman

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