

ROSE JEFFRIES PEEBLES

1870 - 1952

Rose Jeffries Peebles came to Vassar College in 1909 as Instructor in English. She had graduated from Mississippi State College for Women, and had taught there as well as in preparatory school and in junior colleges in Arkansas and Kentucky. At that time she was completing her doctorate at Bryn Mawr.

Twenty-nine years later, in 1938, she retired from the college as Professor of English and, for the five preceding years, Chairman of the Department.

Her field of special scholarly interest was prose fiction, medieval or modern. Her doctor's dissertation on the romance of Longinus was part of the wide-spread work of interpretation of Arthurian legend which went on in the first quarter of this century, and remains the authoritative study on its subject. Her work on the romance cycles never ceased, and occasional articles - A Note on Hamlet, 1916, The Children in the Tree, 1927 - found their way into print. Others were written and never published.

The real outlet for Miss Peebles' scholarship was the classroom. There her activity as scholar and teacher, through three decades, brought into existence our present courses in prose fiction and together with her wide European contacts supported the interest in comparative literary studies which her colleagues Professor Marian P. Whitney and Professor Winifred Smith were developing in their fields of German and Drama.

Even her first years of teaching at Vassar were notable. The richness of her inquiring and fearless mind, and the unique balance of warmth and detachment, serious grace and humor in her personality brought new life to basic required courses. In 1912-13 she first offered a course in "English Metrical Romances, especially those of Germanic origin, and the development of the Arthurian legend". This course changed gradually first into "The Romance in English Literature
ROSE JEFFRIES PEEBLES (Continued)

from its beginnings to the present time", then into "The Romance..with emphasis on its importance in the development of the novel". By 1923-24 three courses had grown from the

original stock: "The English Novel from its Beginning to George Eliot", "Prose Fiction" - an advanced course, and a seminar: "Studies in English Romance". Alumnae of the mid-twenties remember with excitement the sense of independent adventure and creation which radiated from these courses. The seminar especially represented Miss Peebles' deep conviction of the rightness of sustained, advanced, independent work for all students, the plodding as well as the brilliant. From the belief in this kind of work throughout the college, and from the students' response to it, came the incentive for the publication of the Vassar Journal of Undergraduate Studies; from it too came in part the plans for the new curriculum of 1928 with its assumption of the students' maturity and readiness to carry on specialized study with a background of adequate knowledge. Miss Peebles' interest in romances and novels and in her students' responses to them and to life was not a secondary, trained and academic matter but a primary and temperamental taste. All human activity - thoughts, feelings, doings - absorbed her. Everybody's story, anybody's story, received her sympathetic scrutiny; her patience with student-problems and story-problems alike seemed endless, in spite of the incisive criticism with which she could, when she cared to, terminate stupid or egotistic talk. But those who worked with her knew that much of her tolerance was simply one aspect of her irrepressible zest to "explore further", no matter what the fatigue or the disagreeable results of that exploration might be. She gave no impression of physical daring or of unusual energy, but her appetite for experience, direct or vicarious, her delight in life and her power to receive it through her senses and imagination was inexhaustible.

Her classroom connections with her students and colleagues were only a small part of her relations with them. She gave them hospitality with unlimited ROSE JEFFRIES PEEBLES (Continued)

generosity; the house at 123 College Avenue where she and Professor Edith Fahnestock kept open house for successive college generations of Vassar students and teachers stands for an often neglected aspect of the academic life - the illustration of the intellectual life as

a way-of-existence, rather than the precept alone. There was good fortune in that house, to be sure; but there was also knowledge of the world, and involvement in many kinds of non-academic work; there were people comin back with the results of their lives' joys and sorrows, and there was always harty and profound laughter to set the perspective right. These friends lived so that it was plain to see how the academic life, lived with eager minds and rich sympathies, makes its followers deeply human, fruitful, and satisfied. At the end of her life, after fourteen years of retirement, Miss Peebles was able to say clearly that her life had been happy, that she had done what she wanted to do. This ripeness it has been Vassar's privilege to share in.

Respectfully submitted,

Helen Lockwood

Mary Sague

Barbara Swain

XIII - 306-307