

DORIS AURELIA RUSSELL

1902 - 1962

Doris Aurelia Russell joined the Vassar Faculty in September 1940 as an instructor in English. She died on April 24, 1962, Professor of English and Chairman of the English Department. In the twenty-two years of her connection with the college she was recognized as a superb teacher, a tactful administrator, and as a scholar whose scholarship informed all her thinking and whose personal warmth suffused all her scholarship.

She was born in New York in 1902, and received her education at Ashley Hall in Charleston, South Carolina, Smith College, Bryn Mawr College and Columbia University. After graduating from Smith she taught in Denver and, from 1930 to 1933, at the Peking American School and the National Tsing Hua University. She came to Vassar from the Shipley School in Bryn Mawr, where she had been sought out by the English Department in its quest for the kind of teacher whose concern was equally with the matters to be taught and with the minds and interests of those who were to learn. She continued her contact with the school-world by representing Vassar for a number-of years on the School and College Conference on English and by serving as Assistant Dean from 1952 to 1955.

In her tribute to Miss Helen Young, the brilliant teacher with whom she had worked at the Shipley School, Doris Russell wrote of Miss Young's "deep respect for her students as individuals... She had a very keen awareness of their lives outside the classroom and of the realities for which they were being prepared. She knew that their hours in English classes were brief and numbered, but also that if they were rightly spent they could last for a life time. There was not a moment to be wasted and the needs of all kinds of temperaments and abilities were given serious attention." This awareness Doris herself had in the highest degree. It won her the devotion of students of all kinds and spurred them to varied excellence. She regarded each student, however, capricious or undedicated, as a significant individual, but she saw beyond the persons to the historical moment and constantly called them to realize the quality of that moment. "Certainly one of the purposes of your kind of education is to intensify your awareness of the physical and social structure which surrounds and shapes your individual lives," she said in her 1958 Convocation Address.

Her sense of the reciprocal character of "individual" and "society" showed also in her scholarship. She was deeply interested in the theatre - perhaps the most "social" of the arts. She wrote her doctor's dissertation on John Dryden, satirist

DORIS AURELIA RUSSELL (Continued)

and playwright. When she went to England in 1956-57 with a plan to study the friendships of John Donne, that plan came to focus on the question of literary patronage and the Countess of Bedford - that is, on the means by which society sponsored literature and

on the role of a wealthy woman in that sponsoring. Friendship came naturally to Doris Russell, and persisted through life. She had friends in every group that she lived and worked with including the China group with whom she shared the exciting youthful years in Peking, the English group whom she knew during her periods of research in Cambridge, her colleagues in the administration of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation for which she served as regional committee member from 1957. Her hospitality was gracious and abundant; she lived among lovely things and she invited all her friends to enjoy them with her. A colleague of ten years ago wrote after her death:

"I knew she cared deeply about her studies and her students and Vassar – yet there was another world she seemed to bring with her too – of households and 'family' and feminine fulfillments. I prized this much."

She fully and constantly recognized the tragedies of existence—she carried exceptional burdens in her personal life – but she faced them with a superb energy and instinctive optimism that gave her the power to live valiantly and gaily from day to day. Such courage and such buoyancy did not come merely from "character": her intellect played widely and wittily over the field of literature, not superficially, not pedantically. She could not let her subject alone; she wanted nothing more than she wanted her "job" – which was, to mediate between the great works of writing and the minds of college students. To her, the work of art, however, abstract, was still plainly about how people experienced life. She made Edmund Spenser vital to her classes because she understood *The Faerie Queene* as a serious analysis of the Nature of Things, as a real story of the many aspects of love and of the involvement of real people in real politics.

In the last two years of her life she served as Chairman of the Intra-Mural Events Committee for the Vassar Centennial and as Chairman of the English Department, and she taught her courses with renewed freshness; her intellect, her affections, her social involvement were unquenchable. Her friend, I. A. Richards, wrote recently to a close friend at Vassar: "Yes, we often find ourselves thinking of Doris. It is a most sustaining thing to do."

Caroline G. Mercer

XVI 65'66 Barbara Swain

Vernon Venable