

At a Meeting of the
Faculty of Vassar College
held
September fourteenth,
nineteen hundred eighty-three,
the following
Memorial

was unanimously adopted:

Marion Tait was born on November 4, 1911, in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, and was raised in Preston, Ontario, where she spent an apparently unexceptional childhood as one of a large family. A vivid memory from those early years, however, was of determinedly wandering off at the age of four to follow a passing parade; a kindly policeman had to bring the reluctant child home. This was undoubtedly a sign that Marion was not destined to stay long in Preston, Ontario. Upon entering high school she was shunted into the so-called "commercial" track, but her admiring teachers, amazed by this young woman who, by the end of the first year, had far surpassed their own skills in typing and shorthand, urged her to move on to the academic honors program. This she did with great success, earning thirteen "firsts" in her senior year. Her achievements won her scholarships — one of them from the Independent Order of the Daughters of the Empire -- to Victoria College of the University of Toronto. In college she majored in Classics because, as she stated years later, "if one was to understand anything, it seemed important to begin at the beginning."

The four years of her college career were important in shaping the independent and forthright spirit which remained with her.

At Toronto she "belonged to a group that considered itself intellectual, radical, and oh so sophisticated." Moreover, she "read T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence, and Freud. We were 'women,' not 'girls,' and called each other by last names."

Advised by her professors to seek out a graduate school in the U.S. rather than remain at Toronto, Marion Tait journeyed south in the midst of the Great Depression to begin advanced work in Latin and Greek literature at Bryn Mawr College. Her work there was distinguished. She travelled to Italy for study in Rome at what turned out to be just the wrong time. Years later, she loved to describe in vivid and rather frightening detail the triumphant entry into Rome of Adolf Hitler, where he was greeted by his ally, Mussolini; Marion was there, too, swept up in the crowd that thronged the Piazza Venezia. Eventually she had to seek refuge in the house of some hospitable Romans who plucked her, on the point of being trampled underfoot, from the mob.

Her Ph D in hand, Marion taught first at Sweet Briar

College, then at Mount Holyoke, whence she came to Vassar in 1948, at the age of 37. She came as the new Dean, and she came into a community deeply divided over educational policy.

Her predecessor as Dean, C. Mildred Thompson and President
Quotations are from the Varsity Graduate, Victoria College, February
1949.

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Henry Noble MacCracken had, during the war years, developed an alternative three-year degree program with a new c-term in addition to two regular terms. This innovation had divided the college. Sara Gibson Blanding, who had been appointed president at the end of the war, had not been able to calm the troubled waters, inasmuch as many members of the faculty liked and wanted to continue the new system, and just as many were determined to return to the four-year degree. There were those members of the faculty who could not bear to speak to each other if they could avoid face-to-face confrontations by altering their routes through Main to the post office.

Marion Tait's reserved and patient diplomacy soon took over. According to one colleague, when Marion first arrived at Vassar, she sat quietly in faculty meetings and did not plunge in to run the show. She refused to find out which faculty members stood for which plan. Even her choice of seat in faculty meetings conveyed her attitude: she did not sit with the president, facing the faculty, as had her predecessor, so that she could see which way people voted. Instead, she sat in the front row with the faculty and listened to what she heard. One person reports that "she was tactful and got on with everybody with her cool, balanced attitude and pleasant warmth. When she did speak her mind, she carried conviction."

In those first years at Vassar, Marion was able to spend more time with students than was possible later in her career, and she was extraordinarily effective with them. Those who were troubled came to her for sage and sympathetic counsel, those who were undecided about courses or career found in her a ready and knowledgeable adviser. Her job at that time encompassed the duties now performed by the Dean of the College, the Dean of Studies and the Vice President for Administrative and Student Services. As the years went by and some of the tasks she had performed were relegated to others, she saw less and less of students on a daily basis. This she regretted, and her return to full-time teaching in 1966 after seventeen years of continuous service as Dean was prompted in part by a desire to return to the classroom and to students. As a teacher she was just as effective as she had been as administrator; numerous devoted members of her classes will readily attest to that fact.

Although she accomplished much in her administrative role such as helping to coordinate Vassar's teacher-preparation program with the State Department of Education, perhaps the most important moment of Marion Tait's deanship was

her defiant challenge in November 1959 when the trustees appeared to be about to implement Beardsley Ruml's ideas of economy. Ruml's Memo to a Trustee was widely read in the fifties and it influenced many who hoped to streamline liberal arts colleges and make them more "efficient." In 1959, what was proposed was a move to a 20-to-1 student-faculty ratio, and paring and tampering with the curriculum. The

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Ruml Report suggested that the trustees would do a better job than the faculty in shaping the educational policies of the college, a notion counter to the tenets of governance introduced at Vassar by MacCracken in 1915. (This new governance was a prototype of academic governance at many other colleges in the country.) Marion Tait at this point rose in the faculty to voice her considered opinion that the Ruml report was in a most essential way a reactionary educational document and that all colleges would either move forward or backward as they responded to its proposals. She accused the trustees of seeming to ignore that governance which gave the faculty the right to determine educational policy. And she called upon the faculty to rise up in protest. They did, and subsequently their differences with the trustees were settled amicably, with the governance intact. It may well be that the course of Vassar history was significantly influenced by Marion Tait's resolve.

Not always did Marion agree with the faculty, or with the students. When she did not, she was not afraid to say so and to make difficult decisions, even when they were unpopular or caused her pain. She constantly searched, in her own mind, for what was right, what needed her support, what was possible and desirable, and what should be rejected. Her special talent was an ability to isolate differences of opinion and tackle matters of principle, leaving problems of personality aside.

Her service to the college as administrator was over only temporarily after 1966, for she was called back in 1970 under President Alan Simpson to serve an interim term while a search was conducted for a new Dean. Even after she again resumed her teaching post for the few remaining years before her retirement, she was called on again and again to render sensible advice to the community. In the words of one colleague, "she took on the role of elder stateswoman." She retired in 1975 and went to live in Massachusetts, first in Weston and then in Concord, where she died of cancer on September 30, 1982.

For many, Marion Tait embodied the highest ideals of this college. Her belief in the excellence of the liberal arts and her optimistic faith in her students guided and sustained colleagues and students alike. She was a woman of parts. She loved gardening and watching birds, and roughing it at her

Vermont summer house. She loved Homer and unfortunately never completed the work on Homeric simile that she took with her into retirement. Though she published little, she was known and respected in the profession, and served for many years on the Managing Committee of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens and on the JUFY for the Prix de Rome of the American Academy in Rome.

She will be remembered for the remarkable detachment which coupled with an innate compassion, gave her intellect the strength to resolve numerous thorny issues. Who of us

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who have seen it will forget the sight of Marion in a faculty meeting, turning as she stood, her glasses perched on the end of her nose, her right hand punctuating her remarks with abrupt strokes, as she went straight to the heart of the matter and offered a telling insight or, more often, a solution? This patrician paradoxically sprung from humble beginnings has left her mark on Vassar College. May the pragmatic idealism which guided her continue to guide us who follow in her stead.

Respectfully submitted,

Winifred Asprey

Elizabeth Daniels

Elizabeth Drouilhet

Robert Pounder