

MARGARET FLOY WASHBURN

1871 - 1939

Tribute of a Former Pupil

During my freshman year at Vassar, back in 1914, I heard a lecture by Professor Witmer of the newly established psychological clinic of the University of Pennsylvania, on psychological work with children, and I knew immediately that that was the work which I would undertake. Accordingly I took all the courses in psychology which were offered at Vassar.

Miss Washburn's lectures were always so well organized and so closely knit that one could take notes in outline form with the logical points in perfect sequence. This perfection of organization meant the strictest attention on the part of the student. There could be no daydreaming, with a flurried awakening to seize on the gist of a paragraph, or to snatch at a topic sentence. Her lectures were brilliant, exact, clear, with such a wealth of references and citing of original sources as almost to overwhelm a student as yet unable to appreciate the breadth of scholarship and the painstaking labor involved in the construction of a single lecture. It was as though each lecture were a paper prepared for a gathering of scientific colleagues, rather than for a group of inexperienced students.

I recall wishing that the course in social psychology would never end, both because of the absorbing fascination of the material, and because of the consummate skill with which she unfolded and developed the theme.

Although in the intervening years I have unfortunately forgotten many of the facts which Miss Washburn taught me, I shall never forget her attitude toward facts. I shall always remember, and pass on to students in my turn, the necessity for the accurate observation and strict recording of phenomena as they occur, refraining as far as possible from the projection of adult motivation and point of view in the interpretation of the behavior of children.

I was not one of Miss Washburn's most brilliant and promising students, and she let me know it. She was sympathetic but unsentimental and just. When I asked her for her advice she placed my assets and liabilities before me, but she said she thought I had good stuff in me, and left me with the conviction that it was up to me to prove it.

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Tribute of a Former Pupil (Continued)

I believe that I never thought of Miss Washburn as a human woman with feelings, aspirations and inadequacies such as I felt in myself, but rather as a kind of vener-

able sage upon the lecture platform, who sometimes appeared upon the walk between Rocky and Main and mingled for a moment in ordinary human discourse--then vanished. I remember one instance when I was commenting to my roommate upon the presence of a strange young man who had suddenly made his appearance upon the campus. A voice over my shoulder remarked drily, "That is the President of this Institution." It was Miss Washburn speaking, and she was often like that: she would mysteriously join in your conversation when you didn't know she was around, just as though she were part of your mind. I am glad to say that I made a visit to Miss Washburn a few years ago when I had reached the maturity she had had when I was a student, and I was astonished to find her a delightfully warm and amusing human being. I realized before that she had had no shortcoming as a teacher, but now I knew she would be unequalled as a friend.

Elizabeth M. Hincks '17
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