

LAURA JOHNSON WYLIE

1855 - 1932

Bern, Milton, Pennsylvania, December 1, 1855

A.B., Vassar College, 1877

Ph.D., Yale,

Instructor in English at Vassar, 1895-96

Associate Professor, 1896-97

Professor of English, 1897-1924

Professor Emeritus, 1924

Died, Poughkeepsie, New York, April 2, 1932

An expression of what the life of Professor Wylie has meant to us, her colleagues, may perhaps best be approached by reminding ourselves of her own definition of the task of college education as she looked into the future on the day in June, 1924, when she ceased from active service among us. The continued existence of such a college as Vassar, she said in her farewell speech, would be justified only by its successful establishment as a vital part of the life of the country; not as the educator of a single class, isolated from the community, but as the source, through those whom it directly trains, of enlargement for every community into which they go.<sup>1</sup>

The largeness of such a conception, together with the energy, the high spirit, and the thorough consistency with which she lived up to it, was Professor Wylie's great contribution to her college and to the cause of education, throughout her twenty-nine years of teaching as a member of our faculty. And in spite of her failing health in after years, the "depth and fertility of her thinking power" (to use the phrase of one of her colleagues) could still be felt by all who knew her in college or town - felt as a force for better living and more significant social intercourse among all people. Personal freedom, social responsibility, creative activity - these things she taught steadily wherever she was and however she lived. But first she followed them herself. Miss Wylie came to the college as instructor in the fall of 1895, as a seasoned teacher and with a doctor's degree from Yale. She was expected to make changes and she made them; within two years she was LAURA JOHNSON WYLIE (Continued)

head of the department and had revolutionized the work, organizing it on what must even today be called a sound, flexible, and progressive plan for the artistic and scholarly study of English. While she showed in the selection of her assistants her power to estimate character and ability, she was,

until 1901, almost single-handed in the work of reconstruction, the only person officially responsible for the management of the department and the only person in it above the rank of instructor. She carried at the same time a heavy teaching schedule and, however large her classes, succeeded in setting an example of the principle she so firmly believed in, of completely individualizing every student therein. In the conduct both of her classes and of the department, her most remarkable achievement was - as President MacCracken has elsewhere said - her power to make almost any group of people, with varying or even hostile opinions, work together for the common good without compromising their integrity or her own. She was always a tireless worker and a courageous fighter for any principle she believed in, but never at the expense of Justice or courtesy to an opponent. Her colleagues paid tribute to her ability by electing her to the most important committees and all movements in the faculty towards a freer curriculum and greater faculty participation in the management of the institution found in her an influential supporter, though always with the proviso that proposed experiments must be fully thought out and results inspected. The students, too, trusted her and felt her personal charm and the breadth of her sympathy to such an extent that few student enterprises of any moment were begun without asking her advice or help. In wholly inadequate recognition of these qualities, the faculty hereby record their deep sorrow at the death of their dear friend, Professor Emeritus Laura Johnson Wylie, and their sense of loss at the passing away of one who was always and most of all a great teacher.

Rose Jeffries Peebles

Amy L. Reed

L. Katharine Warren, "The Retirement of Miss Wylie,"  
Alumnae Quarterly, November 1924,  
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