

At a Meeting of the
Faculty of Vassar College
held
October fourteen, nineteen hundred
and ninety-eight, the following
Memorial
was unanimously adopted:-

Alan Simpson, the seventh president of Vassar, guided the college through, in his words, "a dramatic adventure ... the marriage of very bold changes with very powerful traditions." The often controversial policy changes he proposed and carried out produced the most fundamental transformation of Vassar since its founding in 1861. Alan Simpson pursued this transformation during a period of critical events in our national history - the Civil Rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the Woman's Movement - as well as of student protests on these and other issues which made this the most trying time in the twentieth century for college and university presidents.

Alan was born on July 23, 1912 in Gateshead, England. He grew up in neighboring Newcastle-upon-Tyne where his father was circulation manager for the daily newspapers. He graduated from Oxford in 1933 with first-class honors in History; a Harmsworth Senior Scholarship permitted him to study for an M. A. degree at Merton College. While at Oxford Alan met an American graduate student, Mary McEldowney, who was pursuing Charles Kingsley's literary works under the supervision of C. S. Lewis. They married in 1938. After a year as a Commonwealth Fellow at Harvard, Alan took up lecturing on Modern British History and American History at the University of St. Andrew's in Scotland and completed his work for the D. Phil. at Merton College before World War II interrupted his teaching. He served as an officer in the Royal Artillery for five years.

In 1946 the Simpsons decided to settle permanently in the United

States, moving to the University of Chicago. Alan became the Thomas E. Donnelly Professor of History, winning the University's award for excellence in undergraduate teaching. Mary became Associate Editor of the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists. In 1959 Alan was chosen Dean of the University College. The new Dean described an educated man as someone "thoroughly inoculated against humbug; thinks for himself; and tries to give his thoughts in speech and on paper some style." A word person himself, with a dependable eloquence, Alan had the great good fortune to be married to a professional editor.

During the Chicago years, Alan wrote two widely different books which established his reputation as a scholar. In Puritanism in Old and New England Alan was intrigued by the Puritans' blend of self-interest and idealism and their ability to draw on general discontents to fashion effective revolt. Alan brought to his keen analysis of Puritanism an elegant style worthy of Lord Macaulay (an historian he much admired), a sense of fairness and gentle irony, and a remarkable ability to deal compassionately and sensitively with a group he did not fully admire. He was critical of the Puritans' unbridled enthusiasm, dogmatism, and divisiveness, while admiring their ideological and spiritual integrity, commitment, and discipline. If Alan's book on puritanism revealed how comfortably he dealt with broad concepts, his second book, The Wealth of the Gentry, 1540-1660, demonstrated his mastery of the "hard facts" in a pioneering case study.

When Alan accepted the presidency of Vassar in 1964, he did not foresee how tempestuous and trailblazing the decade ahead would be. He later described the first two years of his administration "as an effort to strengthen the old Vassar" to maintain its traditional position as one of the most distinguished and selective colleges for women through faculty development, fund raising, physical planning, and loosening the curriculum's straitjacket of requirements. But he soon faced growing student discontent and a concern about the viability of single-sex education which was originally raised by his predecessor in 1961.

By the summer of 1966 questions about Vassar's direction persuaded Alan and the trustees to organize a committee on future planning. The committee's investigation was overtaken in November when President Kingman Brewster, on behalf of the Yale University Corporation, issued an invitation to the Vassar trustees to study the possibility of affiliation between the two institutions, with Vassar moving to New

Haven as a coordinate undergraduate college. Two investigating groups - the Vassar-Yale Study and the Study of Alternatives - withstood criticism which, as Alan said, "made the feuding of the Guelfs and the Ghibelines seem like a love feast."

Although Alan favored further study of affiliation, in November, 1967 a divided board decided against moving, decreeing that Vassar now would educate men as well as women, that the enlarged student body would become more diverse, and that a Vassar education would be changed to meet new needs. These changes included more opportunities for independent study, field work, and study abroad and the possibility of graduate centers and cooperative programs with other educational institutions. Undaunted, Alan proclaimed enthusiastically, "Full steam ahead in Poughkeepsie."

After the Vassar faculty in May 1968 recommended coeducation rather than creation of a coordinate college, Alan revamped the administration to accelerate admission of men. They became part of the new Vassar world during the next two years through exchange programs, transfer from other institutions, and, in the fall of 1970, as entering freshmen. Alan eased the transition to coeducation by declining to veto the Student Government Association's vote to end all parietal and curfew regulations. His commitment to gender equality made him unwilling to countenance a double standard in which women were subjected to parietal rules and men were not. His controversial decision to abolish in loco parentis was followed subsequently by most other major academic institutions. Students also were given primary responsibility for their academic programs in a major revision and updating of the curriculum which provides the fundamental outline of the curriculum under which we operate today.

The years of Alan's presidency saw upheaval and disruption on campuses across the country. A central issue was "student power." Alan viewed the issue as an opportunity to find the most appropriate means of including students in college governance. He achieved this change in governance through a series of landmark retreat conferences bringing together students, faculty, administrators, and trustees.

As in all transitions, there were rough moments. In 1969 a group of African-American students, demanding more rapid movement toward racial and curricular diversity, took over the core of Main Building. Alan sympathized with their aims, but not their methods, and least of all the

publicity which the sit-in generated. He found himself mediating between students occupying Main and faculty and trustees meeting in emergency session. The sit-in was finally brought to a peaceful resolution and the College moved rapidly to create curricular programs, staffing patterns, and student services to support the ethnic, class and geographic diversity which Alan had charged the new admissions program to produce along with coeducation. A few years later, another group, this time largely white students, enraged by negative tenure and reappointment decisions regarding several of their favorite faculty members, occupied the North wing of Main. Alan waited them out but also created a faculty committee which reformed the system of faculty evaluation and included student participation in it.

Improving the scholarly standing and opportunities of the Vassar faculty had been a major part of Alan's agenda from the beginning. A Middle States Association report in 1958 which said that Vassar laid too little stress on the importance of scholarship and research in faculty hiring and promotion strengthened Alan's conviction that strong measures were needed to address this criticism. In 1968 he solicited the support of all departments in seeking new faculty already published in their field or with promise to do so. Some departments balked, but sixteen professors joined the faculty at senior level in the next few years.

Less controversial and more significant in raising standards and stimulating research and publication was the introduction in 1968-9 of a new faculty leave policy. Wishing to increase our competitive edge, Alan replaced the existing policy of applications for leave which might not be approved with a system of automatic leaves which came with guaranteed frequency. Perhaps the most liberal leave system in the country at that time, it is still highly valued by the faculty. Alan made scholarship part of the formal criteria for tenure and for a strengthened merit system in salary review. Previous uncertainty in the timing of tenure decisions was replaced by a set probationary period.

Alan sometimes joked that he was only half-educated, having never recovered from premature specialization at Oxford. Early in his presidency, he began to support multidisciplinary studies as beneficial for faculty and students alike. He chose to use part of Professor Helen Lockwood's bequest to the college to generously endow the program in American Culture, allowing faculty from different disciplines to teach together throughout a semester with compensation given to their

departments for released time. Alan may have been slow to see the importance of Women's Studies because of his concern about projecting a new image of a coeducational Vassar. But he did permit the appointment with outside funding of a Director of Women's Studies, initiating what has become a full-fledged multidisciplinary program touching nearly all departments at Vassar.

Sometimes Alan's innovations built upon a Vassar tradition. The college had pioneered in 1861 in making the collection and study of original paintings an integral part of the curriculum. Believing that this asset was too little appreciated, Alan in 1974 suggested a new organization, now known as the Frances Lehman Loeb Art Center, which has attracted widespread support from alumnae/i. But he also reached beyond the Vassar community to enlarge "the range of learned resources," as he often put it, available to us, like the Associated Colleges of the Mid-Hudson Area and a proposed graduate institute in technology, explored in a study financed by IBM, which aroused bitter opposition from some students and faculty.

However, these initiatives in regional cooperation as well as some other projects in the ambitious agenda proposed when Vassar chose to stay in Poughkeepsie as "mistress of our own house" soon ran up against the constraint of a looming deficit. The costs of providing for a 50% increase in student body size, expanded faculty, and new leave system coincided with double-digit inflation sparked by the oil embargo and Viet Nam War. Suddenly, the College was considering year-round-operation as a means of deficit reduction, a proposal which found little faculty support.

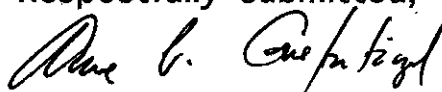
Throughout the complicated and contentious process of creating a new Vassar, Alan faced his multiple responsibilities among fractious audiences with good grace and flashes of wit. His realism helped him survive angry opponents and sharp fluctuations in his popularity. He did his job as president with visible enthusiasm and he did it twenty-four hours a day, despite a heart attack which had hospitalized him in 1969. He was a keen listener, unafraid to hear points of view he opposed, and never hesitated to lobby for his pet projects. At parties he often could be seen bearing down on some faculty member in a friendly argument on behalf of a Governance amendment, change in the committee structure, year-round operation, or the technology institute.

Alan and Mary were always happy to share their ongoing scholarly

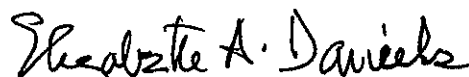
interests with the Vassar community, often in a residential hall parlor, as when they read from the letters of Jane Carlyle which they were then editing. When they retired in 1977 to their farm in Little Compton, Rhode Island, they embarked upon a series of scholarly projects that ranged from the sizeable Jean Webster-Storyteller down to a pamphlet investigating the origin of the name Little Compton. Alan resumed the role of full-time historian with characteristic tenacity until the tragic death of his son Ruppert, struck down in his prime by a blood disease. Alan became noticeably less vigorous after this loss, but his twinkling, dry sense of humor remained. He suffered a stroke this spring and died a month later on May 5, 1998.

Alan brought to the presidency intelligence, style, in the best sense of that word, and leadership characterized by grace, civility, and infectious buoyancy and optimism. He prepared Vassar to meet effectively the challenges of its next century.

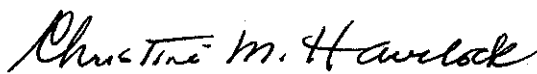
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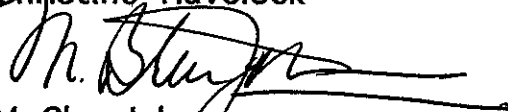
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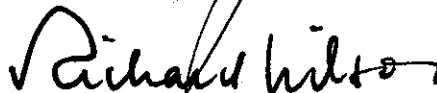
Elizabeth A. Daniels



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Clyde Griffen, Chairman