

Professor James Bruce Ross: Draft of Faculty Memorial Minute.

A member of the Vassar faculty for nearly thirty years, James Bruce Ross (known as J.B.), emeritus professor of history and distinguished medievalist, died at the Collington Life Care Community near Washington, D.C. on December 10, 1995, at the age of 93. Born in Independence, Missouri, on July 3, 1902, and named for her father, she was the youngest of six daughters in a family of seven siblings, the eldest her brother, Charles, the friend and press secretary of President Harry S. Truman.

Beginning her long association with Vassar College as a member of the class of 1925--with study at Cambridge University in 1922-23 --she was strongly influenced by such Vassar teachers of history as Eloise Ellery and Lucy Maynard Salmon. Their emphasis on primary sources in teaching was to her especially compelling and it would become a dominant element in her own life as a teacher. Soon embarked on graduate study in medieval history at the University of Chicago, she received a master's degree in 1927 and the Ph.D. in 1934. Exploring the broad subject of medieval interest in Roman antiquities, her doctoral dissertation represents an early expression of the revisionary spirit in which she would approach teaching and scholarship in both "medieval" and "Renaissance" history.

In 1935, she began her teaching career at Vassar as a substitute instructor, offering courses in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as well as the introductory survey. Whatever may have been the tensions of this first year of college teaching,

they were nothing compared with the lasting impact of a trip to Spain with her friend and colleague, Leila Barber, of the art department, in the summer of 1936. Unaware, like most foreigners, of the impending civil war, they arrived in Granada on July 19th, only to learn of the sudden coup of the fascist General Francisco Franco. Cut off from all direct communication with the outside world, they were trapped in Granada for nineteen days during its siege and ultimate capture by Franco's army. Finally rescued and flown to Tangiers a few days later they were ultimately welcomed in New York as heroines of a front-page story in the New York Times. Not this moment of fame, however, but the bombing of their hotel on August 7 and the death of several inhabitants marked the climax of an experience so vivid in the memory of J.B. Ross that, describing it some fifty-five years later, she could still "hear the whistling bomb." The guns of Granada seem also to have alerted permanently this medievalist's strong sense of involvement in her own larger world, her active commitment to an understanding of its problems and struggles.

After a second year of teaching at Vassar followed by an interval of two years (1937-39) as instructor in history at Wellesley College, she returned to Vassar in 1940--first as instructor, then promoted to assistant professor in 1943 -- for what proved to be the rest of her academic career.

In 1944, she was appointed Assistant Dean, sharing some of the many administrative responsibilities that were until then the sole province of Dean C. Mildred Thompson. In this office, which

she was the first to hold, among other duties she served as secretary and executive of the committee on scholarships, ex officio member of the committee on admissions, and adviser to first-year students. Another formative experience of her earlier years of teaching, her service as assistant dean offered valuable opportunities not only to master aspects of college administration, but to acquire a deep and lasting interest in beginning students and the freshman year as an introduction to the intellectual ideals and life of the college. Although her years as assistant dean represent her most intensive service to the college in its institutional aspects, she continued throughout her career to contribute in this way, especially in those areas closely related to the intellectual life of the college, by her service on committees concerned with the library, scholarships, faculty research and fellowships and the like. She also served as department chairman from 1956 to 1960.

After four years (1944-1948) as Assistant Dean and a year's leave for research in Europe as Faculty Fellow (1948-1949), she returned to full-time teaching as associate professor of history in 1949. Six years later, in 1955, she was promoted to the rank of full professor, with a year's leave (1955-56) as Faculty Fellow to complete research on a longstanding scholarly project. In 1962, she was appointed to the Lucy Maynard Salmon chair of history, which she held until her retirement in 1966.

A particularly appropriate occupant of a chair honoring her former teacher, she continued as she had remained throughout her

teaching career wholeheartedly dedicated to their shared goals. Like Professor Salmon, who was primarily concerned with American history, J.B. Ross saw the relationship between teacher and students as that of "comrades in a quest," and she extended this quest most creatively to the especially challenging pursuit of knowledge and understanding of a more distant past. Discussing it specifically in relation to her enduring concern with beginning students, in a talk to an alumnae committee that she chaired, she stressed as a major goal "the intensifying of that life of the mind which the student has come here to experience." From the very beginning "she should be made to feel that she is entering upon a wholly new experience, more mature, more demanding, more self-directed than any she has encountered before." Rejecting the notion of an easy transition from school to college, she advocated "intellectual shock" for all freshmen, the kind of intellectual shock that would launch them on the new learning experience she proposed. Most important in her view was the close relationship of students and teacher working together in a spirit of joint inquiry, sharing the pursuit of truth, and seeking to understand the nature and problems of their particular discipline as "comrades in a quest." This, she maintained, "has always been and remains the ideal of instruction at Vassar College."

She put this ideal to the test successfully in various ways, among them the designing of a new introductory course as an alternative to the existing freshman course in history. Intended as a twofold introduction to the study of history as a mode of

inquiry and as the story or narrative produced by investigation, History 104 began with the Greek historians, Herodotus and Thucydides, at the origins of history in its twofold aspects, and proceeded throughout to combine the reading of sources, especially historical writings, with the study of the most up-to-date scholarly works on major aspects of ancient and medieval history. Demanding though it was, History 104 was a substantial success in presenting a concept of history as a constantly expanding and changing body of knowledge and interpretation, and in evoking a continuing interest in the subject.

Similar goals and concerns, more intensively pursued, dominated J.B. Ross's more advanced courses in medieval and Renaissance history, in which careful planning and critical scholarship supported stimulating and imaginative assignments and discussions designed to excite the interest of students and impel them on their own search for knowledge. Always open to new ideas and approaches to the goals and problems of historical studies, J.B. Ross was most inventive and supportive in the development of substantial projects involving the active participation of students. One especially striking example of such joint efforts was an intramural symposium on various aspects of the relations between East and West in history, produced under the auspices of the history department in 1960, during her chairmanship, and involving students in history courses on the Renaissance and Reformation, the Far East and other pertinent areas, and including students from many other departments. Another was the

notably successful Renaissance Seminar of 1962-63, which involved some twenty students and five faculty members from the departments of history, art and Italian, in a year-long intellectual adventure that culminated in a study-trip to Italy in the spring vacation. At least one student member of this group, now a professor of art history, remembers this as "the most compelling intellectual experience of my life."

To this same former student, "imagination" was the word that came to mind and lingered when she thought of J.B. teaching in the second floor classroom in Swift. "To be sure," she says, "her approach to European history could also be described in ways that situate it within the development of historical scholarship after 1950. Emphasis would then fall on her interest in the Annales school, her pioneering work on the history of women and the family. No other teacher, however excellent, had opened history to encompass research into the quality and texture of past lives. In her classes students learned to look at the peripheries of history, instead of the so-called center, and to question the hierarchies of thought organizing yet also restricting the discipline." However the character and spirit of her teaching may be defined, she aided her students in approaching a distant past not only through the most illuminating and often most innovative works of modern scholarship, but more directly, and above all, through the words and works of men and women of the past.

Another and also an enduring outcome of this devotion to

the sources of history were two anthologies, in which many selections were newly translated by the editors, produced in collaboration with Mary Martin McLaughlin. Pioneers in a genre that has flourished vigorously since the 1940s, The Portable Medieval Reader (New York: The Viking Press, 1949; Viking Penguin, 1977--) and The Portable Renaissance Reader (New York: The Viking Press, 1953; Viking Penguin, 1977--) are, with many reprintings, still in print after more than forty years. (The "Suggestions for Further Reading" in both volumes have been updated early this year, 1997, to be published in their next reprinting.)

An exemplary teacher, challenging, inspiring and especially gifted in the guidance of students, J.B. Ross was equally an exemplary scholar, innovative and resourceful in pursuing the initiatives and materials of her research. Indeed, for her, teaching, scholarship and reaching out to a wider audience were parts of a continuum, aspects of a sustained endeavor to demonstrate through exploration of the past its meanings for the present. Reflecting this endeavor most fully is a project that engaged her scholarly attention for nearly a decade while she was still teaching, an intensive study and translation of a unique text, known to only a small circle of scholars until she made clear the larger importance of this contemporary record of revolutionary change in twelfth-century Flanders. In giving a voice to this eye-witness account set down day by day on wax tablets, not by a learned monk or cleric, but

by an ordinary layman, Galbert of Bruges, a notary, she brought to life for modern readers the impact of a tragic event, the murder of a count of Flanders by his highly placed vassals, a crime that exposed the discontents and conflicts of an entire society. A model of its kind, this work, too, has demonstrated its durability in print. Galbert of Bruges, The Murder of Charles the Good, Count of Flanders, translated with an introduction by James Bruce Ross, was published first by the Columbia University Press (Records of Civilization), 1959-1967, then by Harper and Row (Harper Torchbooks, 1967-1982), and since 1982 in a series of reprints for teaching sponsored by the Medieval Academy, and published by the University of Toronto Press. [The fate of those responsible for the count's murder was examined more fully in an article, "The Rise and Fall of a Flemish Clan: the Erembalds and the Murder of Count Charles of Flanders, 1127-28," Speculum, 34 (1959), 367-390.]

In view of her qualities and achievements as a teacher and scholar, it is hardly surprising that her friend, the renowned art historian, Richard Krautheimer, should have mentioned her in his autobiography as one of his three most distinguished colleagues during his years of teaching at Vassar. Their shared interest in the middle ages also brought these two teacher-scholars together in the Vassar Medieval Society, of which J.B. Ross was a founder and a most active member. Encompassing a number of medievalists in the fields of art, music and literature. its members met twice a year, in convivial settings,

usually to hear an informal talk on current work by one of the group or to share in general discussion of a particular topic; the Medieval Society remained active from 1950 to 1962.

Formally retired from teaching in 1966, J.B. Ross embarked with enthusiasm on a long second career in scholarship and writing, one that lasted nearly as long as her years as a teacher. Settled in Washington, D.C. with her sister Helen, a distinguished child psychoanalyst, and with periods of research in Italy, especially in Venice, she remained active as a scholar for nearly three decades, making weekly visits to the Library of Congress even in her early nineties.

Among several novel enterprises of this "second career" was a truly ground-breaking contribution to the then infant study of the history of childhood: her essay on "The Middle-Class Child in Urban Italy, Fourteenth to Early Sixteenth Century," (in The History of Childhood, ed. Lloyd deMause, New York: The Psychohistory Press, 1974; Harper and Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1975-; also published in German and Italian translations). During this period, too, she demonstrated a special affection for Venice and its rich archives in several well-researched studies of the role of Venetian schools and friendship circles in the formation of leading Catholic reformers of the sixteenth century, notably Cardinal Gasparo Contarini. (See bibliographical note appended to this record.)

But the expanding study of medieval women was the pioneering enterprise that became the compelling interest of her

later years. Drawing on all of her gifts as a scholar and her deepest intellectual concerns, this long-term venture was undertaken once again in collaboration with Mary M. McLaughlin; its result is a study entitled Perilous Quests: Women's Initiatives in Western History from Late Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century (HarperCollins, forthcoming).

Of her life in Washington, a close friend of these years and a Vassar graduate, Elizabeth Eisenstein, remarked on her energy as a researcher, "always fascinated by some new finding and always enthusiastic about her current project." Another friend of this period and a fellow-medievalist, Giles Constable, then director of the Dumbarton Oaks Center, stressed her personal charm, "her gentleness and good humor combined with a strength of character and a firmness of view that knew no compromises on matters of principle either in public life or in academic affairs." To those who knew her best as friends, fellow-scholars and students, this strength of character was joined with other qualities that made her life and work so powerful an example of comradeship in a quest, of the collaborative nature of knowledge and achievement.

Professor Ross was a member of the following professional and learned societies: the American Historical Association, the Medieval Academy of America, the Renaissance Society of America, and the American Society for Church History.

Respectfully submitted,
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Professor James Bruce Ross: A Selective Bibliography.

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