

VASSAR COLLEGE
POUGHKEEPSIE NEW YORK 12601

At a Meeting of the Faculty of Vassar College
held
April 6, 1988
the following Memorial for
John Aldrich Christie, 1920-1987,
was unanimously adopted:

When **John Aldrich** Christie died last September, he was where he wanted to be--at his home in Vermont with his family. Born in Northampton, Massachusetts--the son of a Congregational minister-- and reared in Connecticut and southern Vermont, John was an inveterate New Englander. Away at college in Oberlin, Ohio, he read Henry James's Roderick Hudson as a cure for homesickness. He returned to New England to earn two M. A. s, the first at Wesleyan and the second at Yale. In January 1946, as he was fond of saying, Helen Lockwood "plucked him out of Yale" to teach at Vassar. He liked being close to Vermont. He jokingly told friends that he had wanted this written into his Vassar contract: in the spring, during maple sugaring time, he would be permitted to leave for two weeks in Vermont.

John received his doctorate in English and American literature from Duke in 1955. Four years later as a Vassar associate professor he was featured in a Pageant Magazine article entitled, "A Professor to Remember: What Makes a Dynamic Teacher?" The caption under one photograph read: "Rapt meeting of minds: Freshman class, teacher Christie, and poet Milton." With Yankee resignation and good humor, John characterized the article as "a spoonful for the educational cause." "While not stirring me to my professional toes," John wrote, it "does Vassar and teaching no harm."

In his courses on American literature John relished teaching that pantheon of New Englanders--Hawthorne, Melville, Dickinson, Emerson, and especially Henry David Thoreau who was the subject of John's book, Thoreau as World Traveler, published by Columbia University Press and the American Geographical Society in 1965. It was Thoreau's sense of the adventurous relationship between observed and imaginative experience that stirred John's own sense of himself as a teacher and a person. The first principle of his teaching was always that knowledge is not knowledge until it is experienced on the pulse. To him, as to Thoreau, the individual experience was primary. "No matter how mild the human adventure," John once wrote, "it can be made inestimable" by what one imaginatively brings to it.

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John's appetite for the human adventure was hard to forget, reflected again in his love of maple sugaring. When one visited him, in Vermont, during sugaring, the air was full of the smell of simmering maple sap. Maple syrup was used on and in everything-- toast, cereal, coffee, ice cream. The sheer energy and physical capacity of the man drew comment, especially if one should also happen to notice he had only one arm. A fall from the rafters of a neighbor's Vermont barn

when John was a boy had left his arm badly broken. **Infection and** the lack **of** penicillin led **to its** amputation. **John** never considered himself handicapped, and neither would **anyone** who ever saw him splitting logs. **Once**, as he and a friend approached a toll booth while **John** was driving, the friend realized that **before** he could help in any way **John** had **gotten out** his wallet, paid the toll, shifted gears, **and** was leaving the toll booth while simultaneously **putting away** his wallet **and** steering **with** his knees. "Well," the friend **thought**, "if **John** is **doing it**, **it must** be all right."

At Vassar **John** seemed to serve at one time or another on virtually every faculty committee **on campus**. He was **president** of the Faculty Club, when there was a faculty club, **from 1947 to 1949**. With his first wife **Dorothy Sexton Christie**, and their three sons, **David, John, and Roderick**, he brought visiting writers together with **students and faculty** in his **home**. In 1951 when **he** became a **Cushing House** Fellow, his family became the first faculty family **to live in** the dormitories. The classes of 1951 and 1963 chose him as their **Class Advisor**. **For** nine years he served as an **officer** in the American Association of University Professors, ranging from president **of the Vassar chapter** **to** member of the National Council. He was **one of a three-man AAUP** investigating team which in 1966 charged the trustees and administration of St. John's University in Jamaica, Queens, for violation of academic freedom **in** their dismissal **of thirty-one professors**. He enhanced Vassar's financial aid program **by** creating the position of student research assistant, initially training **students** himself and paying them **out of his own pocket**. When **John** joked **about getting** money **for** such projects, his friends could recognize his deft ability **to** poke sly verbal fun at himself **or** the institution he was **so devoted to**. When he was serving as a **consultant to** Nyack High School in the early sixties, he told Vassar he would **need** traveling expenses. "How much?" he was asked. "Between twenty and thirty dollars," he said. Then, **John** would say, "I **got** a check **for twenty-one** dollars."

John felt **proudest of** his contribution **to** multidisciplinary education at Vassar. From the time of his arrival at Vassar he was involved **in** what was then called **the Related Studies Program** in American Culture, a program which collapsed in the mid-1950s **for** lack of funding. In 1972, **John** was able to regenerate the program **by** successfully directing a **portion of** Helen Lockwood's bequest toward its financial support. As the first director **of** the

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multidisciplinary program in American Culture, **John** gave shape to many of the distinctive goals **and** innovative principles **of** team-teaching that now mark multidisciplinary education at Vassar. He saw the College as **being at the forefront of** this experiment in education, and twelve years **after forming** the Program, he saw **"genuine** multidisciplinary teaching" **now** quite **"come-of-age"** at Vassar.

In the summer of 1977 **John** married Elizabeth Garrettson Warner and set **off** the following year **for** Greece where he **taught** as a Fulbright professor. He had previously made two extended **trips to** India, serving as a consultant **to** Indian universities on establishing graduate programs in American studies, and helping the University **of** Delhi establish India's first **doctoral** program in American literature. He also visited the University **of** Kyoto **and** lectured in northern India, Nepal, Italy, **and** England. His appetite **for** new experiences remained strong. When in India, he lived in old Delhi, **not** the protected atmosphere of New Delhi. In Greece he learned Greek.

It was in Greece that a melanoma was discovered **on** **John's** **shoulder**. He was subsequently given a fifty-fifty **chance of** surviving the year. Back in Poughkeepsie, a year later in 1980, his **son** Matthew was

born. For the next five years he energetically continued teaching until he retired, on schedule, in 1985. After thirty-nine years of service to Vassar, or thirty-nine and a half, as he reminded everyone at his retirement dinner--no detail is too small for a scholar, he once said--he moved to Vermont where he and Elizabeth shared their love for the details of life in the house they planned and built together. Visitors heard talk of books, maple sugaring, and music. He and Elizabeth had sung together in the Christ Episcopal Church choir, and John had sung in a Vassar group that sight-read madrigals. In one of the last photographs he is happily watching his son Matthew play the piano. His last gift to a colleague was a marvelous plastic bag to collect maple sap; his last advice, where to get another. His last letter, dictated in the hospital, was his response to another colleague's book, which he had just read in galleys. His last wish was to be at home with his family. "Our experiences tell us all," John once wrote, "we are the makers, the poets of our own experiences."

Respectfully submitted,

Frank Bergon, Chair

Susan Brisman

William Gifford