

# MASSAR COLLEGE

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At a Meeting of the Faculty of Vassar  
College

held

October fifth, nineteen hundred and  
eighty-three, the following

Memorial

was unanimously adopted:

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Jonathan Charles Clark was born in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, on June 18, 1941. He grew up in Vermont and in southern California where he came to love the Pacific coast as he had the New England mountains. As a boy in Vermont, he recalled catching perch with his hands by the dam in the Pussumpsic River; and as a boy bodysurfing on the California beaches, he recalled yelling to a friend as they caught a wave together and rode to shore where Jon discovered that his fellow surfer was a California sea lion. In a small apartment on Pacific beach, Jon's mother slept on the living room couch while Jon shared a bed with his step-brother. At night he washed out the good pair of pants he had to wear to school. He never had very much money. His father had left his mother just before Jon was born, and his step-father was killed in the Second World War when Jon was still a child. When he was sixteen, his mother was committed to a mental institution. After a brief stay with an uncle on a chicken farm in the San Joaquin Valley-an event that left him with a distaste for chicken the rest of his life-Jon returned to southern California where he was on his own. He had his own apartment and went to La Jolla High School where he was a brilliant student, especially in mathematics and the sciences, and he was allowed to take a college chemistry course with Linus Pauling. He walked to San Diego to get a bicycle so he could pedal to Scripps Institution of Oceanography where he worked after school. He played quarterback for La Jolla High, and when you looked at Jon's nose you saw the result of his clash with the bruisers of San Diego High who went on to become the bruisers of USC.

He received college scholarships to Harvard and Dartmouth, but because Dartmouth offered more money, he said, "I couldn't afford not to go to Dartmouth." So he was back in New England where he loved the mountains and was on the college ski patrol. He liked to hitchhike to Boston, but in other ways he felt out of place at Dartmouth. In his sophomore year he walked off the campus without bothering to withdraw, leaving behind four F's on his transcript. He joined the Army with the expectation of being sent to the Monterey School of Languages, but instead, for the next three years, though stationed primarily in Wurtsburg, Germany, he traveled as a member of the Chemical Corps. After his discharge, he was glad to be rid of the Army, and he claimed to have celebrated the fact by throwing his boots, fatigues, and everything else associated with the Army into the East River. In New York he worked in advertising layout for Life magazine, then as a cataloguer for the American Institute of Aeronautics, then as a clerk for Morgan Guarantee Trust. With his wife

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Judy he moved back to the west coast. While working as head of the sample department for the paper distributors of Blake, Moffat, and Towne, he

began taking night **courses** at San Francisco State. Transferring to the University of California at Berkeley, he discovered his love of colonial American history and knew that he wanted to continue his studies at Yale with the historians he admired, Edmund S. Morgan and J. H. **Hexter**.

Jon was **graduated** with honors from Berkeley and awarded a Danforth **Graduate** Fellowship. At Yale he won the Tew Prize as the best first-year **graduate** student in history and later the George Washington Egleston **Prize** for the best dissertation in American history. After a year as a Junior Fellow in History at the Newberry Library in Chicago, he **began** his teaching **career** at **McGill** University in **Montreal**. The following year, 1973, he arrived at Vassar with his wife Judy and his young **daughter** Hilary.

From the moment of **his** appointment Jon was a popular and influential **teacher** of history at Vassar. **Students** flocked to **courses** in his **special area** of expertise-colonial America and the period of **the ratification** of the Constitution of the United States. But he soon displayed a firm **control** and versatility in other areas, including American legal **history**, **Atlantic civilization** in the early modern **period**, and **historiography**. Characteristically, in being a good **teacher**, Jon **broke** all the usual **rules of** good teaching; he **laboriously wrote** his lectures **for each class down to** the an's and the's and **read** these lectures **aloud** to the students. But **what** would almost always have been a deadening **approach** became, in Jon's hands, an exciting and lively presentation. **Generations of students** confirmed that **he was** not just one of the best lecturers, but one of the best **teachers** in the department.

To say that Jon "took an active part in Department affairs" **hardly begins to** describe how indispensable he was to his colleagues in History. He was **one of the prime movers** in the **reform of** the history **curriculum** in 1977-78, he played a **crucial** role in the design and teaching **of** an **ambitious course** in **comparative cultures**, and he took **the lead** in preparing a **year-long course** that satisfies the freshman reading and writing **require-**

**ment**. Judy and he **were** popular house fellows in Cushing **for** three years; his chairmanship of the **Committee** on the Quality of Residential Life **ON** brought **perspective** and **imagination to** a vexed area **of** campus life. His **participation** in the American **Culture** Program as advisor, teacher, and planner was **much sought** and appreciated.

**And** These are only the obvious examples drawn from one area of **Jon's** concerns. In a **larger** sense, Jon was a living Resource Center for **so many** people **both** on and off the campus. When students **or** faculty or an **administrative officer** called **for some** statement **of** policy from **the History Department**, more often than not Jon would **volunteer to produce** **the** difficult **first draft**. Just as students gravitated towards Jon, so,

too, did his fellow historians find him always willing to lay down a book or a pencil and talk about anything from baseball to Puritanisms. It was natural to ask Jon what the Puritans meant by "preparations" or how to explain Puritanism to non-Bible-reading students. But it was equally natural to discuss with him what to do about an undeserved traffic ticket, the Giant-Dodger playoff series in 1951, or the comparative merits of ale and beer. Jon never gave information; he shared it. Nor did he offer advice—he was far too unpretentious to do that. One always came

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away from a conversation with Jon feeling that one had learned a fact, picked up an idea to think about, collected a joke never to be forgotten. His desk piled high with papers, Jon was never too busy to undertake more work or, in a larger sense, to make Swift a sane and habitable place. One member of the Department says: "I remember that when I thanked Jon for anything, he would turn out the palm of his hand and reject the idea that he had done anything at all. But he helped all of us to be better teachers, scholars, and human beings."

As his mentor, Edmund Morgan has said so well, "Jon Clark was a good historian for the same reason that he was so good a friend: he took other people seriously and took their striving seriously." He was attracted to the New England Puritans by their insistence that the world be made better than they ever expected it would be. The dominant concern in Jon's own scholarship was understanding the varied ways by which people try to reconcile their political ideals and ethical standards with the conflicting interests and demands of everyday life. He began by asking whether the framers of the United States Constitution may have meant what they said despite all the debunking of their motives in twentieth century historiography. Entitled in its most recent version, That More Perfect Union, Jon's dissertation foreshadowed all of his subsequent scholarship in the skill with which he revised received opinion without maligning his predecessors. His first published essay demolished the myth of the consolidating federalists with wit, impeccable research, lucid presentation, and respect for the honest attempts at interpretation by others.

Jon saw his coming to Dutchess County as an ideal opportunity for testing in a more exact way a central conclusion of his dissertation--that political allegiances during the ratification controversy could not be explained by class or interest group. In shifting his attention from the macrocosm of political debate at the federal and state levels to the microcosm of political behavior in its full context in one locality, Jon had to use much more varied kinds of evidence, acquire new skills to deal with them, and acquaint himself with the rapidly developing literature on

social history. A major contribution by itself was Jon's reconstruction of the complicated networks of personal relationships in Poughkeepsie based on family, shared religion, economic standing, and occupation. But Jon's aim in the essays which resulted from his research always was to illuminate the choices people faced and what we can learn from their responses. No wonder his scholarship contributed so constantly and powerfully to his teaching. The best illustration is the recently-published booklet, A Government to Form, where Jon uses local events and figures to make intelligible a sophisticated analysis of political behavior during our Revolution.

In the summer of 1982 Jon embarked on a new, ambitious project, less than the explanation of the rise of the two-party system in England and America. He had just received a leave in the spring term of 1983 for that research, when on Sunday, January 30, he entered the hospital complaining of high fever and headache. His illness was diagnosed as endocarditis caused by staphylococcus aureus, and he quickly lost consciousness. A week later, on the morning of Monday, February 7, 1983, Jonathan Clark died at the age of forty-one.

Jon Clark was a scholar and teacher of several parts, but through his character ran two dominant traits: a sense of integrity and fierce

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independence on the one hand and a capacity for compassion and friendship on the other. That Jon was able to keep two traits unified in a single personality accounts for the apparent contradictions in his life and work: his tough-minded secular outlook balanced by an

abiding interest in Puritan theology, his gruff, sardonic, sometimes earthy, wit, combined with caring for students and colleagues and deep love for wife and daughter, his contempt for unjust authority matched by unstinting service to the Department of History and to Vassar. Jonathan Clark will be remembered as an intensely private man who gave generously of himself to students and community, profession and College.

Respectfully submitted,

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