

Sept. 16, 1992

Memorial Minute for Julia McGrew

Julia McGrew was born in Canada on the first of September, 1920. In 1989, referring in a personal letter to one of her favorite authors, Alice Munro, she wrote, "She grew up in rural poor Ontario, and wanted out. I grew up . . . in medium-poor urban Ontario (Toronto, [pronounced] Tranta) and wanted out." "Out" for Julia became a chance to study at Oberlin College in Ohio, where in 1943 she received her bachelor's degree and her master's in 1945. For the next two years she taught at the Laurel School for Girls in Cleveland. Here she was known to students as "McGreusome." Teaching was suddenly interrupted, however, by tuberculosis and a long period of slow recovery. This time of illness, however, was not lost time. She read the sanitarium's collection of murder mysteries, and, in collaboration with her friend Caroline Fenn, published two mysteries of her own, *Murder by Mail* and *Taste of Death*. She also decided that, as soon as she was finally freed from medical incarceration/hospitalization, she would continue graduate study and pursue her love of Chaucer and earlier Medieval literature.

She enrolled in the graduate program at Bryn Mawr College to study medieval literature with Stephen Joseph Herben and began to focus her scholarly interests on the Icelandic sagas. In 1953-54, supported by a Bryn Mawr Travelling Fellowship, she spent a year in Copenhagen, where the greatest repositories of Old Icelandic manuscripts are to be found. In the early seventies her love of the Icelandic sagas would culminate in the publication of her translation of the longest of all the sagas, the story of the Sturlungs.

After receiving her Ph. D. from Bryn Mawr in 1954, she taught for one year at Smith, three more at Mount Holyoke, before joining the Vassar faculty in 1958. Hardly any time seemed to pass after this moment before her colleagues in the English Department, at least those who were teaching parallel sections of Shakespeare, began to find scribbled messages on the small cards they received for registration: "Miss McGrew please." When we speak of her success as a teacher we must begin with the breadth of her interests and her knowledge. Julia McGrew had

an extraordinary sense of text and ability with languages. A partial list of her languages would include Danish, French, German, Greek, Latin, Old English and Old Icelandic. Once, when auditing a Greek course at Vassar and casually completing all the quizzes without an error, she modestly explained to a colleague, "It really isn't fair because I have a photographic memory." The Middle Ages naturally remained her central interest in the classroom, but in teaching she was as much at home with Eudora Welty as with Erasmus, with D. H. Lawrence as with Chaucer or Beowulf.

Her teaching was marked by tremendous generosity. Repeatedly she added an extra course to her teaching schedule so that Vassar students might study Old Icelandic or Old English. For ten years she team-taught as an extra course with Ben Kohl a seminar in medieval and Renaissance humanism which essentially became the heart of Vassar's Medieval Studies Program. She supervised individual projects so that students could do advanced work which no undergraduate course could cover. In 1971-72, to give one further example, only three English students signed up for the Department's senior seminar in Middle English Literature. She taught the course as an extra class. One of her students remembers that Julia would arrive at the library classroom every Thursday morning at 9:00, carrying a thermos of coffee and a basket of freshly baked cookies. She then tuned this advanced course to the particular interests of the three students in it. All three members of the class went on to graduate work in medieval studies. This pattern is typical, for Julia inspired generations of those who worked with her.

Her colleagues are still asking themselves: How could it be that, in class discussion, Julia might ask an apparently simple question--a question which they had perhaps asked with modest success--and receive an enthusiastic and thoughtful answer from enthusiastic, energized and thoughtful students? Perhaps one aspect of her quiet charisma was that her students understood that Julia wanted to learn. She was a fellow student. She also called on the members of her classes and was willing to put people on the spot. In fact one colleague remembers that she put him on the spot on the very first day of their team-taught class by asking him to translate a passage from Vergil. All recognized, however, that she challenged

them to find out what they would say, never to find out what they could *not* say. She had a hopeful curiosity about other's responses. Friends, students and colleagues made intense and happy efforts to rise to her challenges. Her students never felt that they were being talked down to. Julia taught freshman with as great a success as she taught seniors. In fact she taught Freshman English until the year she retired. As these students found their association with her ripening through their later years, they also found their conversations with her mysteriously "developed." As one graduate puts it, "The level would rise." She was delighted by intelligence and imagination wherever she found it, and she wanted to involve her friends and associates in that delight. It is fitting that her retirement from Vassar took the form of a Medieval Weekend, a time of lectures and celebrations, a touching and emotional event which brought back to the campus many of her students and friends. The main speaker was the distinguished scholar, Gwyn Jones, who volunteered his services and shared fully the affection and admiration the Vassar community held for Julia at the moment of her retirement.

Julia McGrew retired to Denmark in 1980. Her love of Denmark had been rekindled by a vigorous term of teaching in the English Department at Odense University as Visiting Lektor in the spring of 1971. Subsequent summers she spent on the island of Fyn. Her affection for Danish culture soon crystalized into the resolve to retire early and settle permanently on this island. By 1980 she had acquired her beloved and beautiful half-timbered, thatched farmhouse, called Allégården, in the village of Kertinge on the northeast corner of Fyn.

The years of her retirement were happy years. From 1980 until shortly before her death, Julia was affiliated with Odense University's Medieval Department as guest scholar. She offered courses in Shakespeare, Chaucer, medieval literature, and Canadian authors, and supervised papers and theses, including a doctoral dissertation on Chaucer written by Marianne Børch and presented as an excellent published book only last autumn. She was also active in arranging the annual international symposia held by the Medieval Department, and served diligently as co-editor of the several Proceedings, helping to transform the Middle High Conference English characteristic of so many academic publications into something much more flexible and attractive.

Her happy decade of retirement was shaped by her rich association with newly made friends who became for her a second family: her neighbors Sven Åge Michaelsen and his wife Tove, their children Hella and Jan, and Inger and Aksel Kristiansen. In retirement she helped save a medieval breed of dogs, the "Lundehunde" or puffin hounds, from near extinction, did farm chores with her neighbors, gardened, taught, entertained visitors, and read extensively. Her bookcases were full of favorite writers such as Eudora Welty and Alice Munro, along with a wide collection of other Canadian poets and novelists, several shelves of contemporary Danish authors, and both editions of the OED. After the necessary seven years of residence, she was granted Danish citizenship.

Julia had spent much of her life with illness. She had suddenly been advised, when she was in her middle twenties, that she was suffering from tuberculosis. Overnight she found herself isolated, so isolated that she wondered if she had lost her identity. Her personal possessions were taken from her or destroyed. So great was the fear of tuberculosis at that time. For a time she was actually cut off from the world. During her treatment for this illness she lost one lung and acquired a permanent aversion for bananas, which the sanitarium constantly fed her for her health. In the last decade of her life she again suffered, this time from crippling arthritis. One hip replacement had to be corrected by a second operation. But through all her difficulties she was constantly active, teaching, gardening, and observing the natural world around her. She read the works of younger scholars and encouraged them. She welcomed friends and former students. Last winter another illness was diagnosed as incurable pancreatic cancer and, after a brief stay in the local hospital, she returned to Allégården, where on March 23, 1992, she died, cared for by her loving Danish family and, one can say, surrounded by listening and grieving friends around the world.

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