

MEMORIAL MINUTE FOR RICHARD GREGG

(read at faculty meeting, Jan 21, 2009)

Richard Gregg died on Dec. 11 after a long illness. He had retired in 1998 after having served Vassar for 30 years.

Sandy Gregg (“Sandy” is how he preferred to be called) was born in Paris in 1927 to American parents. His father was a specialist in public medicine connected to an international organization, and spent several years in France. (Sandy’s French connection was later strengthened by his marriage to Françoise Bouriez.) Sandy graduated from Harvard in 1951, majoring in Russian, and went on to an M.A. in the same institution. He was a student there Vladimir Nabokov did a brief stint of teaching at Harvard, and Sandy recalled that he was absolutely the worst teacher he had ever had. Sandy enrolled in the Ph.D program at Columbia, writing a dissertation of the 19th c. poet Fyodor Tiutchev which in 1962 earned Columbia’s Ansley Award for the best dissertation in the humanities produced in that year. In researching this topic, Sandy became a member of the first contingent of American students allowed to conduct research in the USSR as a result of a cultural exchange agreement that had come into force in 1958. Sandy spent the 1958-59 academic year in Leningrad, trying to make sense of the voluminous but virtually undecipherable papers of Tiutchev held in a literary institute there.

Sandy’s book on Tiutchev came out in 1965, and was immediately recognized as a landmark contribution to scholarship. In the years that followed Sandy authored some thirty articles in various scholarly journals, nearly all of them

focused on 19th century Russian literature, primarily on Pushkin and Gogol.

Sandy Gregg came to Vassar in 1968, hired as a full professor with tenure, and throughout his thirty years here chose to remain chair of the Russian department. He also served dutifully on a number of faculty committees, but (I'm afraid) avoided most faculty meetings, attending literally none in some years. He tended to mistrust technology and found no use for computers that our administration distributed to the faculty offices. I recall that early in this period Sandy asked me to show him how to read and send emails. My demonstration was however soon cut short by his favorite saying: "Life is too short," and Sandy's computer gathered dust for the rest of his years in Chicago Hall. He was also old-fashioned in ways that — I submit — many of us could emulate. He made absolutely no concession to the unfortunate trend known as grade inflation, and handed out C+ and B- with abandon for work he considered "good but uninspired," (as I recall seeing on one of the papers he had graded) all the while remaining an extremely popular teacher.

Sandy Gregg was famous for his ready wit. I remember one occasion when he found himself among Chicago Hall faculty who were discussing a project involving computer-assisted cooperation with Williams College. Sandy prefaced his remarks (which were quite useful) by saying that he felt like a Muslim who had by mistake wandered into a Vatican conclave.

Another occasion involved his annoyance at students in his Russian Novel course (held in one of the Rockefeller auditoriums) who — come warm spring days — tended to doff their shoes and put their bare feet up onto the backs of the

seats in front of them, making all ten toes visible. Sandy found this extremely irritating, complaining to me that he had told the class that “only the Russian novelists are allowed to bare their souls” – but that nothing changed.

I could cite quite a few other episodes of this type, but “life is too short” and I’ll close by saying that Sandy Gregg was a good man, an outstanding scholar, a great teacher, and an unforgettable colleague. All of us who knew him will miss him greatly.