

EDWARD ROBERT LINNER (1899 - 1983)

Edward Robert Linner joined the Vassar faculty in 1934 as an instructor in chemistry. Born to Swedish parents in Buffalo in 1899, he had put himself through the University of Buffalo by holding a full-time job as chemist for the Acheson Graphite Company. His graduate studies, begun in 1925 at the University of Wisconsin, were interrupted by the need to take a teaching post at Lafayette College. In 1931 an appointment as instructor of biochemistry at the University of Minnesota allowed him to resume graduate work and to bring Celestia Davidson of Buffalo west to be his wife.

During his 31 years on the Vassar faculty, Ed Linner pursued his research interest in physical biochemistry, notably in adsorption phenomena. One of his happiest years was spent in 1949-50 under a joint Vassar Faculty Fellowship and a study grant from the American-Scandinavian Foundation, at the Biochemical Institute in Upsala in Sweden where he worked with Arne Tiselius who had the year before won the Nobel Prize in chemistry. But Ed's deepest commitment was always to his students and his greatest talent was that of a remarkable teacher. He saw no contradiction in rigorous mathematical thinking and an undisguised awe at the beauty of the workings of nature laid bare by the human mind. He would derive a complex equation on the blackboard and turn to his class to ask: "Isn't that beautiful?" And he had boundless patience in conveying to his students an understanding and an appreciation of the stark aesthetics of a subject that those who do not know and love it may consider dry.

His love for his students, his colleagues and, yea, even for administrators combined in a love for Vassar College that was as right as it is rare. He knew how to love an institution, knew what that meant. His Vassar was not one of bricks and mortar, of administrative bureaucracy or of tradition writ large in sacred letters; it was the sum of all the lives given to it. A fitting gratitude to those who have gone before, and a proper responsibility to those who will come after, demand that one give one's best to the College in all ways. That is what Ed un-failingly did, and most visibly during his seven-year service as chairman of the Committee on Admissions. At that time--in the fifties--the appointed faculty chairman was in charge of the College admissions policies and practices, with the Director of Admissions serving under faculty direction. For the last two years of that period, Ed was both Chairman and Director of Admissions. Under his aegis Vassar changed from a college drawing its students primarily from a well-defined group of private schools to one that brought together a nearly equal mix of private and public school students.

Ed Linner's definition of education had always included breadth as well as depth. He was an accomplished musician himself, and there can have been few concerts at Vassar in almost 50 years at which Ed and Celestia were not in the audience. He was widely read in English history and literature and in his later years embarked on a study of the history of chemistry in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. The focus was on Sir Humphrey Davy, a man after his own heart. Davy was a close friend of the Lake Poets; indeed, Wordsworth turned to him for help with punctuation. Davy also worked with a number of influential English scientists, including William Hyde Wollaston, Thomas Beddoes and Thomas Wedgwood. Ed spent his second faculty leave in '63/64 in the Reading Room of the British Museum Library, but in the course of that project, his mind took another characteristic turn. In the Vassar Library he found an early-19th century textbook of chemistry by Thomas Thomson (1773-1852) that had belonged to Matthew Vassar. Intrigued by the founder's interest in his own subject, Ed made a study of Matthew Vassar's library and, after his retirement in 1965, went on to write four long essays on the formative history of the College. In this work, he profited from the advice and encouragement of Betty Daniels and of other colleagues who shared his interest in the College's history. After Ed's death in 1983 it was Betty who edited those essays and saw to their publication in 1984 under the title, Vassar, the Remarkable Growth of a Man and His College, 1855-1865.

What remains to be said about Ed Linner is the most important and the most difficult to convey to those who did not know him. He was a man of simple manner, but he was not a simple man. He had a great and irreverent sense of fun: life was fun, work was fun. But he was more serious than most in his commitments and in his values. His sense of rectitude and honor was so deeply embedded in his character that he took it to be natural and universal. When people behaved badly, he might have to admit that they were imperfect, but he refused to think them worse than that. He loved to tell stories but would not traffic in gossip. He had a sharp eye for the difference between dignity and stuffiness. He detested posturing and pomposity and took delight in puncturing it, but he had much affection and affinity for genuine eccentricity. Most remarkably, he seemed to be unaware of anyone's age, including his own. He treated small children as equals, enjoyed their company and astounded them by eating his shoelaces (which were of licorice). He never forgot the welcoming attention given him as a young instructor by the senior faculty, starting with Prexy McCracken, and he returned it to newly arrived colleagues with disarming warmth and directness. He liked people without having to make them over to his specifications. And he maintained his own uncompromising standard of conduct without relinquishing his generosity of mind and spirit.

John Christie
Joe Mucci
Curt Beck

May 8, 1985