

Evalyn Clark Memorial Minute, October 24, 2001

With the death of Evalyn **Anna** Clark an **era** in our **college's history** has come to an end. Together **with** Lucy Maynard Salmon, **Eloise Ellery**, and Mildred Campbell, she **was part** of the Vassar tradition **of pioneering** women historians who were at the forefront of their **profession**.

Born in 1903 in Canandaigua, New York, Evalyn came to Vassar on a scholarship given by Mary Thompson, who donated the Thompson Memorial Library.¹ A Classics major and Junior Phi Beta Kappa, Evalyn **was a** brilliant Vassar undergrad. In one afternoon she **mastered** the **dialect of Theocritus**: "a task on which many students", her admiring Greek professor dryly commented, "spend a whole semester."²

Graduating with honors in 1924, Evalyn continued her Classical studies at Johns Hopkins, receiving her Ph.D. in 1927. Her doctoral dissertation, "The Roman Army as a Factor in the Romanization of Gaul", she noted, "led me to the discovery **of** the impact **of** French and German nationalism on the **writing** of ancient history" and "**later... to** my midcareer change from ancient to modern European **history**." Experiences garnered every summer in Europe between 1927 and 1937 also fostered that change. Increasingly she was driven to examine what lay behind the **rise** of fascism. "Was it", she asked, "resurgent nationalism or something far more primitive and threatening than political or economic forces and theories?" These **concerns** caused **her** to "retool": studies between 1937 **and 1939 at** Harvard **and** Columbia completed her transition to modern European history.⁵

In 1939, after a decade teaching **at** Douglass **College** and a year **at** Sarah Lawrence, and with war breaking out in Europe, Evalyn began her distinguished teaching career at Vassar **as** an assistant professor, starting salary \$2,600. The Chair wrote that he wished "this were a handsomer offer, but the salary budget is . . . feeling severely the results **of** the reinvestment of college funds **at** the lower **rates** of interest **now** prevailing . . ." (*Plus ça change !*) She became a full Professor in 1947 **and** in 1962 **was named** to the Eloise Ellery Chair **of** History -- this **must** have had a special resonance **for** her, as

she had been appointed to succeed Professor Ellery.

Evalyn's service to the College was remarkable. She was twice Chair of the History department, Associate Dean of the **College** for a **decade**, and for one year Acting Dean of the College. For her last two years

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before retirement, **she** was Director of the Five **College** Project, "designed to bring about the better preparation of high school teachers of social sciences." This project resulted in the establishment of Vassar's Education department and teacher training and **certification** programme an addition to the curriculum very dear to her heart.?

Beyond the gates of Vassar, Evalyn was **active** in the American Association of University Women and the American Historical Association.¹⁰ **Most** notably, she **was** an early member and President (1965 to 1967) of the Berkshire Conference of Women Historians. "The Berks", **as** it is fondly called, was formed in 1936 after a group of male historians categorically excluded women from a conference. In 1981, when it was held at Vassar, Evalyn **was** honoured (**with** Mildred Campbell) with a standing ovation.¹¹ An unassuming, yet determined **feminist**, Evalyn was **far** more interested in leading by example than in feminist theory.¹²

However widespread **her** committee and administrative service **to** the College and to her profession, it **was as a** teacher that Evalyn excelled. Against the dark background of the Second World War she developed innovative pedagogical techniques. She later wrote that in her course, Contemporary European History, 1870 to the Present, "**I** jettisoned any orthodox chronological approach . . . and began with 1939 and the *New York Times*, constantly **working** backward **to** trace the roots **of** the **conflict**. It was a contentious subject", she continued, "**since** most students at the beginning were strongly pacifist and even isolationist. Therefore heated **class discussion was** inevitable **and** continual." Throughout her long career, Evalyn never eschewed controversy, compromised her principles, or bowed to prevailing intellectual or political orthodoxies consequently her **courses**, including her immensely popular course on the French Revolution, continued to generate animated,

prolonged, discussion!¹³

Although she would have scoffed at the high-**flown** expression, Evalyn took teaching as a solemn mission, an ethical **trust to** inform and energize the next generation of society's leaders. She had been profoundly influenced, during those pre-war summers in Europe, by having witnessed propaganda and rigid ideology drive out free inquiry. In her teaching she emphasized, to use her own **words**, "the development of critical, informed thinking and independent judgment", close attention to the sources, respect for the evidence, **and** avoidance of glib judgments and unsupported generalizations.¹⁴ Her teaching embraced cautionary tales against idealists and ideologues. "Good intentions and idealism", she

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insisted, "are not enough, and they can be dangerous." The "realist with vision" **was** her ideal.¹⁵

"One of the greatest contributions **we** [at **Vassar**] can make", she **once** stated, "**is training for citizenship**" and "**a** lifetime [of] civic activity ."¹⁶ This training, with **its** emphasis on **the** development of informed, internationally-aware citizens lay **at** the heart **of** her educational philosophy and practice. During the **war** she had **set** up "town meetings" on campus and World Affairs study groups in Poughkeepsie and she served **as** a shrewd analyst of Nazi leadership for **the** Military Intelligence Division of the War Department. In 1952 **she** addressed UNESCO on the place of international **relations** in **the** college curriculum.

Evalyn **was** a woman of strong **convictions** strongly expressed. She abhorred "pretentious ignorance", vanity, puffery, **and** faddism."¹⁸ She encouraged her students to detect and avoid these human failings, **and**, by example, taught them the **value of** modesty, **integrity**, common **sense**, and **cool** analysis.¹⁹

To challenge her firmly held interpretations her students had to read, read, read! **They recalled** with gratitude, perhaps mixed with **just** a little self-pity, **the** high standards she set for them and the long hours. **they** spent in the library poring over original sources and preparing the *weekly* annotated bibliographies she demanded.

we were aware", recalled one former student (who went on **to** become a distinguished historian), "that she **was** working as hard [as] or harder than we." truly gifted and dedicated teacher . . . could have inspired **us to such** efforts." 20

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Evalyn's stature as a teacher **was** recognized and honored **in four** major ways in her own life-time. **In** 1968 a fund was established **to** create, at her death, the Evalyn A. Clark Chair of History.²¹ In 1984 the Evalyn A. Clark Fund, to encourage "excellence in teaching", inaugurated a series of annual symposia on the "current problems, **issues**, or techniques" of teaching in a liberal arts college.²² Also created in 1984, the Evalyn Clark Scholarship enabled British undergraduates **to study** at Vassar.²³ **This** was most appropriate, for Evalyn had **always** taken a special **interest in** foreign students **as** part of her continuing commitment to better international relations. Finally, **in** 1990 she won **the** coveted American **Historical** Association's Eugene Asher Distinguished Teaching Award.²⁴

Evalyn loved teaching and loathed the idea of compulsory retirement.²⁵ But, happily, after her retirement **in 1968** she maintained her close involvement **with** Vassar. Although she continued to travel including long motoring holidays well

into her 90s, and **two** summers in England in search of her ancestry the centre of her universe remained Vassar. Well into old age she was an **active** class president and attended many reunions. In the gracious **house** on College Avenue she occupied for **so** long with Mildred Campbell and recently **with** Margaret Wright,

Professor Emerita **of** Biology, she **entertained** a steady stream of former students among them lawyers, diplomats, journalists, **and** teachers of renown who **continued** over the years **to** share their experiences **with** her and **to** seek her advice. Deep love, **as** much **as** respect, gratitude, or admiration, marked these relationships. **And** she continued to enthrall and fascinate younger students. **It was** wonderful to witness how, well into her nineties, **Evalyn** could quickly dispel the trepidation the **young** Evalyn Clark Scholars naturally felt **on first** meeting her (they had heard of her formidable reputation and steely intellect.) A **few** deft questions, some engaging reminiscences about what **life** was **like** for her generation of women scholars and **all** fears evaporated to be replaced by a sense **of** profound enchantment and delight. Her **touch**, her **instinct** for reaching out to young minds, and above all her engaging enthusiasm for and commitment **to**, **serious** ideas and ideals, were evident **almost to the** very end.

Evalyn Clark died on June **17**, 2001, **at** the age of 98. **Her** life had spanned the turbulent twentieth century. It is **with** love as well as deep admiration **that we** remember this consummate **teacher**.

Respectfully submitted,

Hsi-Huey Liang
Clyde Griffen
Rhoda Rappaport
David Schalk
Anthony Wohl

1 April 20, 1903 in Canandaigua, in western New York. Evalyn Clark, "Biographical Notes". At Canandaigua Academy Evalyn **was** fortunate enough to have among the young teachers **there, who, she said, served as her role models, a recent Vassar graduate who** inspired Evalyn to take **up** ancient history **and** who **also** introduced her to Mrs. Thompson's chief local advisor. *Ibid.* Evalyn was one **of several Canandaigua Academy girls Mrs. Thompson's** generosity enabled **to** come to **Vassar. She** entered Vassar In 1920 in an age when **students** arrived on **campus**, not by **car or** taxi, but by streetcar and when local residents knew Vassar's vacations were about to begin **by** the **extra streetcars lined up** outside the College on Raymond Avenue. At **Vassar** Evalyn came under **the influence** of what **she** termed "the **first** generation of women academic pioneers **of** the late 19th century... and **the** second generation **of** their **disciples who still** had to overcome barriers even **in** the **20th century.**" *Ibid.*

Letter of Cornelius Coulter, **January 30**, 1937, in AAVC files. Professor Coulter **remarked** that "I **think** I have never **known** a more **active** and **powerful mind than Miss Clark's**, nor one **with** a better grasp of big problems and more capacity for independent **thinking.**"

3 Evalyn Clark, "Biographical Notes", p. 1.

ibid., p.2. Every summer, while,abroad, she immersed **herself in** the **current** newspapers and periodicals and cultures of Europe in an attempt to comprehend "the **social crisis of the 1930's and the mounting international tensions.**" *Ibid.*, p.3. also studied in the **university** libraries in **Europe.**

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Evalyn **won** a **Social Science Research Council** post-doctoral **fellowship** to Harvard, (1937-8) **and** studied **at Columbia (1938-9).** **She also** took **graduate courses** in modern European history at the New School **for** Social Research. **Among** her

mentors were Arthur Lovejoy and **Crane** Brinton and Carlton Hayes. *Ibid.*

6 Douglass College was then the New Jersey College for Women, Rutgers University. Evalyn **was an** instructor **there from** **1927-30** and from **1930-37** an **assistant professor**. **Letter** of Charles **Griffin, January 22, 1939**.

'Service as Chair, 1946-50 **and** 1964-6: Associate Dean, 1951-61 and Acting Dean in 1957.

Evalyn had served as Acting Director, 1965-6, of the Five College Project which was inspired by *The Education of American teachers* (1963), written by the former Harvard President, James Bryant Conant. **Previously**, Evalyn **had served for many years at** Chair of the **Vassar** Committee on Teaching **Education**. In 1965, under her **direction**, the **committee** undertook a **study of Vassar's participation as** a pilot college in New York state's Education Department's experimental approach to a new system of teacher certification. Other Colleges, besides VC, **were**: Brooklyn, Colgate, Cornell, **and** SUNY, Fredonia. Running the programme was **an** immense task and **characteristically** Evalyn had **only one-third off her first semester and was full-time** during the second while serving as Director.

Evalyn's interest in high school **education went well** beyond the Five College Project. She was deeply committed **to** building bridges between **the** senior year at school **and freshman year at Vassar and** hoped **for an annual Fall conference** which would bring together public and private high school teachers and Vassar professors. The History department had held such a **conference**, a remarkably **fruitful** one, in 1947. **See** Evalyn's "Freshman Year at Vassar", *Vassar Alumnae Magazine*, June, 1948, p. 21. In 1961 Evalyn **won** a citation **for** distinguished **service as** a member **of the** Adult Education Board in the Poughkeepsie Public school **system**.

"The supply **of intelligent, properly trained teachers, and especially women,** to the nation's high schools was one of Evalyn's deepest concerns.

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She chaired the Committee on Fellowship Awards of the former and served on the Program Committee of the latter. In her 1955 annual report as **Chairman** of the Committee on Fellowship Awards, she stressed **that in the year 1953-4 8,000** PhDs **had** been produced **of whom only** 815 were women. One of Evalyn's quiet missions was to encourage **young** women to get their PhDs. "**Certainly**", she predicted in her 1955 report, **"there will be both more need and more opportunity for women."**

11 **Mildred Campbell**, Vassar's **distinguished** Tudor-Stuart historian, was Evalyn's house-mate for **many years**. There **are actually** two groups, the Berkshire Conference **on Women's History**, and the Berkshire Conference of **Women** Historians. The former organization, **as its name suggests, deals with historical** problems and issues of gender, and meets every few **years**, and is open **to** scholars of both sexes. The latter, which meets annually, **is** exclusively **for** women historians, regardless **of** field. Evalyn **was** primarily involved in the latter. **Evalyn** regularly attended "the Berks" **and it was always a special experience for** conference members **to** meet her. Thanks **go to**

Miriam Cohen, History department, **for** clarifying this distinction.

12 One of her former students commented that Evalyn "**conveyed to us [her students]** some of the crusading **zeal** she felt as a **woman** in the historical profession.... She and her cohort **were** struggling **to** overcome **the** barriers **which still existed in** the profession and continued to bar **women** from **the great university faculties**. Barker, in her Asher Award testimonial, **see below**.

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Evalyn in her "Biographical Notes", pp. 3-4, describes this period in her career as "a kind of crucible for me to form new approaches to teaching **some of the best women students in the country**. . . ." From the beginning, Evalyn eschewed the **orthodoxy or tyranny of rote memorization and strict chronology and she treated the past not only for its own sake and in its own terms, but as a vehicle for the study and understanding of the present**. "These **were** momentous **times to cut your teeth as a teacher at Vassar** - - I still look back at the 1940's **with a sense of exhilaration as our 'finest hour' of intense effort, of a striving for intellectual integrity and comradeship**." *Ibid.*, p.4.

Her **courses continued to** be innovative. Her **377a/b was entitled** "European Thought and Culture since 1750." It suggests that Evalyn added **a substantial ingredient of cultural history, at a time when the vogue was "pure" intellectual history**. 14. "It meant", she added laconically, "long hours **in the library (for all of us)**". *Ibid.*

15 *Vassarion*, 1968, dedication page. "Vassar College: A Case Study of a Survey made in **a Small Liberal Arts College**." (1 September, 1952), **p.16**. Evalyn wrote this **for the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Universities and World Affairs**, (Document 3)

16 *Ibid.*, pp. 3,4. The 1968 *Vassarion*, the Vassar College Year Book, was dedicated **to** Evalyn (and also to Carl Degler), "**with gratitude and admiration**" **and** the dedication page had a quotation (cited in the text of the Memorial Minute) **from** Evalyn **from** a comment she made in **class** (December 15, 1967): "Good **intentions and idealism** are not enough, and they can be dangerous.... You, as part of the academic community, have a responsibility to know the documents relating to the news **and** to apply **your knowledge of history and your common sense** before forming **opinions**."

17 Of **course** Evalyn responded with alacrity and by mid- April she submitted a **21 page** typescript document that **was** very gratefully received. The **War** Department was **so** impressed, it asked Evalyn if she would prepare a similar **document on the French leaders!** Evalyn **indulged in few** personal comments in her War Department **report**, which took the form of a string **of objective, informative and wonderfully precise and focused** biographical sketches, or profiles, **of Goebbels, Goering, Himmler, Von Ribbentrop, Rosenberg, and others**. Nonetheless, her personality comes through, and one can hear her voice: "**one of the few Nazi leaders**", **she** wrote of Ernst Bohle, "**who finished his education** and got his degree,

even though it **was** a business degree." The document vibrated **with** her barely concealed hatred of all that Nazism represented. But, while **Evalyn** was **wonderfully** observant and astringent on the darker elements of Nazism and disgusted with its cruelty **and** contempt for **law** and human **life**, what **also** is revealed in the most illuminating manner, is her **own** philosophy, **so to speak**, her **own** integrity -- and attitudes of mind **that** would stay with her throughout her long life. For example, the **irrationalism** of the Nazi credo **offended as** did the "pompousness, rudeness, and arrogance" of the Nazi leaders. See her report, "The Leaders of Nazi Germany", comments on Von Ribbentrop. Again and again, Evalyn **comments** on their **vanity**.

18 "Pretentious ignorance" was a phrase directed at Rosenberg, "The Leaders of Nazi Germany." *Ibid*.

19 In numerous reports & addresses, Evalyn **stressed the responsibility of** higher education to the well-being of the nation as a whole. A well-educated public **will keep** democracy strong and maintain what she termed **the "democratic control of** foreign policy" and foreign relations. Evalyn had of **course** lived **through** the dark years of Nazism and **Communism** and their **assault of reason**, their **twisting of truth**, their **muzzling of** free enquiry, their destruction of all liberal tendencies. She was, in her modest **way**, a cold **war** warrior, working hard for liberalism,-freedom **of** thought, individual expression. See her hand-written **notes** for a Convocation of a Summer **Institute, July 5, 1951, entitled, "Responsibility of Higher Education in the National**

Crisis."

20 The late **Nancy** Nichols Barker, in **her Asher nomination (*Perspectives*, February, 1991), p. 14. Rather **than** frightening **students with** her **demanding** and sophisticated syllabi, **Evalyn attracted** them **in increasing** numbers. As **Mildred Campbell** put it, to **argue** with Evalyn in the **classroom became** the unforgettable experience **of one's** undergraduate **years**. Anecdote supplied by Rhoda Rappaport, Profesor Emerita of History.**

21 See the Vassar College News Office release, for May 17, 1968 which **announced "the creation** by an anonymous donor of **a** trust fund of one million **dollars** that **will** ultimately revert to the College and be used to establish a professorship of history named for **Miss** Evalyn a Clark..

22 Established through the generosity of Joan Morgenthau Hirschhorn, MD., class of 1945 and Jane Plakias, class of 1942. The **first** symposium, organized by the **History** department, was held in 1985 and revolved around Lucy Maynard **Salmon, in**

whose tradition Evalyn so firmly belonged. Other departments that held symposia **are**: Anthropology, Art, Athletics, Biology, English, Geography, and Mathematics.

23 The students came for one year, between the second and third **years** at their British **university**. The Evalyn **Clark** Scholarship **has** recently been **modified** to honor **two** Vassar students going to Britain for JYA. The Scholarship was sustained through the generosity **of** Mrs. Lionel (Zoe) Hersov and the **Vassar** Club of London.

24 The **award is** given jointly by the American Historical **Association** and the Society for Historical **Education**. Recipients of **the** AHA book award of the previous year are invited to **submit** nominations **of** teachers who by "inspirational impact and excellence ... encouraged that individual to study history." **Encompassing** school, undergraduate and graduate teachers, it **is an** extremely competitive **award**. Evalyn **was successfully** nominated by Nancy Nichols Barker (**class of** 1946), then **Professor of History** at the University of Texas, Austin. Professor Barker had **won, the** previous **year**, 1989, the Gershoy Book Prize from the AHA for her *Brother to the Sun King: Phillipe, Duke of Orleans*. **Barker's testimonial was** read **by** Barbara Rous Harris (class of 1963). In her nomination Barker **stressed that** Evalyn taught "us to perceive **that** the great issues **of** our day could be approached only by knowledge **of** their historical antecedents." Barker went on to say **that** however exciting and **stirring** the discussion of **issues** and **theories**,

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"students were never permitted to **stray far from** a **solid** foundation of historical data. Woe betide the **student** who indulged **in** windy theorization devoid **of factual** framework."

Professor Barker **continued**: Evalyn "**succeeded in** inspiring a whole **generation of** women students in the **post World War II** period, **women** who went on to become lawyers, **scientists**, diplomats, journalists, teachers, and **historians in** their own right. As **for** myself, **I am** sure that **anyone** who could, **as** she **did**, **wake** up a **boy-crazy teenager** whose horizons were bounded by the next dance, to the intellectual **challenge** of the **study** of

\ history was one of the great teachers of her generation and my **youth**."

Perspectives,

(February, 1991), pp. 13-14.

25 "I don't want **to retire**", she said, "I would have **stayed** on longer if I had had the **option**" "**Retirement** seemed **to me** to be **the** end of the universe." *Vassar Quarterly*, Vol. 74, No. 3.