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. 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 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. 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. An unassuming, yet determined feminist, Evalyn was far more interested in leading by example than in feminist theory.

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 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.”

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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. 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 enthral 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."


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.

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, Freedonia. 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.

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.


16 Ibid., pp. 3, 4. The1968 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, Professor 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 Morgentau 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, "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,

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.