

Memorial Minute for James Bruce Ross (J.B.)  
July 3, 1902-December 10, 1995

Copy as read at the Faculty Meeting on May 14, 1997

A member of the Vassar faculty for nearly thirty years, James Bruce Ross (known as J.B.), emeritus professor of history and distinguished medievalist, died at the Collington Life Care Community near Washington D.C. on December 10, 1995, at the age of 93. Born in Independence, Missouri, on July 3, 1902 and named for her father, she was the youngest of six daughters in a family of seven siblings, the eldest, her brother, Charles, the friend and press secretary of President Harry S. Truman.

Beginning her long association with Vassar College as a member of the class of 1925—with study at Cambridge University in 1922-23—she was strongly influenced by such Vassar teachers of history as Eloise Ellery and Lucy Maynard Salmon. Their emphasis on primary sources in teaching was to her especially compelling and it would become a dominant element in her own life as a teacher. Soon embarked on graduate study in medieval history at the University of Chicago, she received a master's degree in 1927 and the Ph.D. in 1934. Exploring the broad subject of medieval interest in Roman antiquities, her doctoral dissertation represents an early expression of the revisionary spirit in which she would approach teaching and scholarship in both "medieval" and "Renaissance" history.

In 1935, she began her teaching career at Vassar as a substitute instructor, offering courses in Middle Ages and the Renaissance, as well as the introductory survey. After a second year of teaching at Vassar followed by an interval of two years (1937-39) as instructor in history at Wellesley College, she returned to Vassar in 1940—first as instructor, then promoted to assistant professor in 1943—for what proved to be the rest of her academic career.

In 1944, she was appointed Assistant Dean, sharing some of the many administrative responsibilities that were until then the sole province of Dean C. Mildred Thompson. In this office, which she was the first to hold, among other duties she served as secretary and executive of the committee on scholarships, *ex officio* member of the committee on admissions, and the adviser to first-year students. Another formative experience of her earlier years of teaching, her service as assistant dean offered valuable opportunities not only to master aspects of college administration, but to acquire a deep and lasting interest in beginning students and the freshmen year as an introduction to the intellectual ideals and life of the college. Although her years as assistant dean represent her most intensive service to the college in its institutional aspects, she continued throughout her career to contribute in this way, especially in those areas closely related to the intellectual life of the college, by her service on committees concerned with the library, scholarships, faculty research and fellowships and the like. She also served as department chairman from 1956-1960.

After four years (1944-1948) as Assistant Dean and a year's leave for research in Europe as Faculty Fellow (1948-1949), she returned to full-time teaching as associate professor in history in 1949. Six years later, in 1955, she was promoted to the rank of full professor. In 1962, she was appointed to the Lucy Maynard Salmon chair of history, which she held until her retirement in 1966.

A particularly appropriate occupant of a chair honoring her former teacher, she remained throughout her teaching career wholeheartedly dedicated to their shared goals. Like Professor Salmon, who was primarily concerned with American history, J.B. Ross saw the relationship between teacher and students as that of “comrades in a quest,” and she extended this quest most creatively to the especially challenging pursuit of knowledge and understanding of a more distant past.

She put this ideal to the test successfully in various ways, among them the designing of a new introductory course as an existing freshmen course in history. Intended as an introduction to the study of history as a mode of inquiry and as the story or narrative produced by investigation, History 104 presented a concept of history as a constantly expanding and changing body of knowledge and interpretation.

Similar goals and concerns, more intensively pursued, dominated by J.B. Ross’s more advanced courses in medieval and Renaissance history. Careful planning and critical scholarship supported stimulating and imaginative assignments; discussions were designed to excite the interest of students and impel them on their own search for knowledge. However, the character and spirit of her teaching may be defined, she aided her students in approaching a distant past not only through the most illuminating and often innovative works of modern scholarship, but above all, through the words and works of men and women of the past.

An enduring outcome of this devotion to the sources of history were two anthologies, in which many selections were newly translated by Ross in collaboration with Mary Martin McLaughlin. Pioneers in a genre that has flourished vigorously since the 1940s, The Portable Medieval Reader and The Portable Renaissance Reader (New York: Viking Press, 1953; Viking Penguin, 1977--) are, with many reprintings, still in print after more than forty years.

Indeed, for J.B. Ross, teaching, scholarship and reaching out to a wider audience were parts of a continuum-aspects of a sustained endeavor to demonstrate through exploration of the past its meanings for the present. Reflecting this endeavor most fully is a project that engaged her scholarly study and translation of a unique text, known to only a small circle of scholars until she made clear the larger importance of this contemporary record of revolutionary change in twelfth-century Flanders. In giving a voice to this eye-witness account set down day by day on wax tablets, not by a learned monk or cleric, but by an ordinary layman, Galbert of Bruges, a notary, J.B. Ross brought to life for modern readers the impact of a tragic event. In this case, the murder of a count of Flanders by his highly placed vassals, was a crime that exposed the discontents and conflicts of an entire society. A model of its kind, this work has demonstrated its durability in print. Galbert of Bruges, The Murder of Charles the Good, Count of Flanders, translated with an introduction by James Bruce Ross, was published first by the Columbia University Press, and since 1982 in a series of reprints published by the University of Toronto Press.

Formally retired from teaching 1966, J.B. Ross embarked with enthusiasm on a long second career in scholarship and writing, one that lasted nearly as long as her years as a teacher. She settled in Washington, D.C. with her sister Helen. With periods of research in Italy, especially in Venice, she remained active as a scholar for nearly three decades, making weekly visits to the Library of Congress even in her early nineties.

Among several novel enterprises of this “second career” was a truly ground-breaking contribution to the then infant study of the history of childhood: her essay on “The Middle-

Class Child in Urban Italy, Fourteenth to Early Sixteenth Century (in The History of Childhood, ed. Lloyd DeMause).

But the expanding study of medieval women was the pioneering enterprise that became the compelling interest of her later years. Drawing on all of her gifts as a scholar and her deepest intellectual concerns, this long-term venture was undertaken once again in collaboration with Mary M. McLaughlin; its result is a study entitled Perilous Quests: Women's initiatives in Western History from Late Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century (Harper Collins, forthcoming).

To those who knew her best as friends, fellow-scholars and students, it was J.B. Ross's strength of character, joined with other qualities, that made her life and work so powerful an example of comradeship in a quest, of the collaborative nature of knowledge and achievement.

Respectfully submitted,  
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