

d. Feb. 16, 1975

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At a Meeting of the  
Faculty of Vassar College  
held  
October twenty-second, nineteen hundred  
and seventy-five, the following  
Memorial  
was unanimously adopted:

C. Mildred Thompson, one of Vassar's most distinguished alumnae and for many years Professor of History and Dean, died on February 16, 1975, in her ninety-fourth year.

After graduating with Phi Beta Kappa from Vassar in 1903, Miss Thompson attended Columbia, from which she received her M.A. and Ph.D.. In 1935 she was awarded an Honorary L.L.D. from Oglethorpe University.

In 1908, Miss Thompson returned to Vassar as instructor and in 1923 was appointed Professor and Dean, positions she held until her retirement in 1948.

She was a woman of firm principles and extraordinary energy. While Dean she taught one course in the Department, History 360, "America from the Civil War to the Present." From the mid-1930's onwards, she directed senior tutorials, which were the equivalent of full courses and culminated in a written thesis.

Her influence on the college was felt in many areas. For example, in 1917 the Committee on Admissions was established, with Miss Thompson as Chairman. The following year, she instituted a change in the traditional procedure of admitting qualified applicants solely in the order of their date of registration: 50 places were held out for applicants taking competitive examinations. This number gradually increased until the 30's, when all candidates were required to take college entrance examinations for admission.

Parallel to her concern for academic excellence was her interest in making it possible for young women of ability but lesser means to attend Vassar. She worked unstintingly to acquire funds for scholarships. In recognition of these efforts, the Board of Trustees established in 1942 the C. Mildred Thompson Scholarship Fund.

In curricular matters she was a true educational pioneer, always willing to accept change, and her brilliant Centennial Address in 1960 showed that this willingness increased with the years. From the time of her appointment as Dean, she took the lead in revisions of the Vassar curriculum - in the late 1920's reducing the number of required courses and introducing independent study. In 1943, she led in the development of a plan for earning the degree

in three years by adding a ten-week term to the regular two term year. This shorter term made possible the introduction of the first inter-disciplinary courses, including "Today's Cities," "The Tennessee Valley Authority," and a major in "Problems and Principles of Reconstruction," to list only a few. The Three Year Plan, never adequately financed and never supported by all the faculty, was terminated in the "Back-to-Normalcy" following the end of the war, but some of its experimental provisions were continued or subsequently re-introduced into the curriculum.

Miss Thompson's duties involved a great deal of contact with students, and she was revered, loved, and feared by many generations at Vassar. Each entering freshman had to sign the Matriculation Book in her presence, an experience many found awe-inspiring. In 1924, an early date for such a program, she set up the first formal psychiatric service for students. In 1931, she established the Board of Residents replacing the former Wardens in order to bring closer the life of the classroom and the life of the dormitory.

She maintained a lively intellectual curiosity, and with President MacCracken founded a group known as "Pot Luck." Each year the President and Dean invited eight members of the faculty, some old, some new, to meet with them once a month. At each meeting one of the faculty would report on his or her research, providing an opportunity to share in discussion and understanding of scholarly work in other disciplines.

Dean Thompson, a native of Atlanta, was a specialist in the history of the South. Her best-known book was Reconstruction in Georgia, published in 1915, which dealt with "the world she had inherited from her parents." It has recently been reprinted in two different editions. She wrote in a crisp, clear, straightforward style, never mincing or wasting words, and in the 1940's tried her hand, most effectively, at radio journalism. She traveled to New York to broadcast the program, "Listen, the Women" weekly over WJZ. She was also a great success on "Information, Please," receiving a number of invitations to participate. A memorial for her ninety-second birthday reports that among her souvenirs was an autographed picture of Harpo Marx, with the caption: "To Mildred from her pin-up boy, Harpo. I heard you yesterday, Baby, and you were really on the beam!" Harpo asked for an autographed photo in return. Miss Thompson sent a picture of her Yorkshire terrier, Becky, with the inscription: "Love me! Love my dog!"

Miss Thompson was a friend of Eleanor and Franklin Roosevelt, and often a guest at Hyde Park. When Roosevelt came to speak in front of the old Poughkeepsie Post Office, for he did campaign in Dutchess County, even though he never carried it, she would be there with a group of banner-waving Vassar students to greet him. She was especially active in the 1936 campaign, chairing an "Educators' Committee

for the Re-Election of President Roosevelt." Other members of that Committee included Presidents Marion Park of Bryn Mawr, Meta Glass of Sweet Briar, Constance Warren of Sarah Lawrence, and Mary Wooley of Mount Holyoke.

A brief sampling of Miss Thompson's many achievements beyond the confines of Vassar might include her service as the only woman member of the United States Delegation to the Conference of Allied Ministers of Education held in London in the Spring of 1944. She flew both ways across the Atlantic in a military aircraft, her first introduction to air travel. On the day of her return she came to faculty tea announcing that she had had breakfast in London, and that she had been the only woman on the plane. All this at age 62! Later, as an outgrowth of that wartime conference, she was a member of the American Delegation to draft the UNESCO Charter, along with Senator Fulbright and Justice Frankfurter.

When she left Vassar in 1948 she was selected by Time Magazine as the only woman on its list of eminent faculty retiring that year. Time portrayed her as an "outspoken feminist," an "internationalist," and an "F.D.R. Democrat," in that order. Though Time may not have meant it as a compliment, Miss Thompson did not protest this description.

After her retirement, she taught history at the University of Georgia. Some members of the Varsity football team were in her course and she claimed that her greatest challenge was to get them sufficiently interested in the material for her to be able to give them passing grades... In 1952-53, she served as Dean of Women at the College of Free Europe in Strasbourg, a school for exiles from Communist countries. She remained active in civic and cultural affairs in Atlanta for many years thereafter.

Since 1964, thanks to the generosity of an Alumna who has wished to remain anonymous, the Department of History has been able to offer the C. Mildred Thompson lectures. Distinguished historians from other universities are invited to lecture and to conduct classes, and these semi-annual events have become an institution in the department, almost a part of the curriculum, and a great benefit to students and faculty alike. They will provide an ongoing tribute to a brilliant, courageous and independent-minded woman, whose influence will be felt as long as there is a Vassar.

Respectfully submitted,

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