

Memorial minute for Rhoda Rappaport

Professor of History, Emerita

1935-2009

Rhoda Rappaport, Vassar College's first historian of science, joined the Vassar faculty as an instructor in 1961. A native of the Bronx, where she was born on August 10, 1935, Rhoda was one of fifteen high school women chosen under the auspices of a Ford Foundation program for full scholarships and early entrance to college. That program took her to Goucher after she finished 11th grade. Though she majored in math and physics there, Rhoda was introduced to the history of science by Dr. Dorothy Stimson, Vassar Class of 1912, and it was in that field that she pursued graduate studies at Cornell University. Under the direction of Henry Guerlac, she wrote her dissertation on the history of geology in the eighteenth century.

Rhoda arrived at Vassar after an intense lobbying campaign waged by the History Department chair at the time, Charles C. Griffin. Griffin had argued to "the powers that were" that creating a position in the History of Science would put Vassar "ahead of the curve," one of the few colleges to teach that field. Professor Guerlac identified Rhoda as a promising candidate for Vassar's new post, though she was still doing dissertation research in Paris. In a letter to Griffin, Guerlac noted Rhoda's "real ambition. . .to teach in a woman's college and to use her talents to present science as a part of cultural history, perhaps above all to explain something

about science as a humanistic enterprise to students who may have an initial aversion to it.”¹ Professor Griffin spared no effort in wooing her to Vassar.

Though hired as an historian of science, Rhoda taught more widely in European (particularly French) history. Indeed, by the early 1970s the bulk of Rhoda’s teaching focused on French history from the Reformation through the Enlightenment and the Revolution, even as she continued to offer courses in history of science, including “The Scientific Revolution, 1500-1750,” “Man and the Cosmos: From Genesis to Laplace,” “Science and Religion: From Galileo to Modern Creationism,” and “Charles Darwin and His World.”

From the Reformation through Modern Creationism, Rhoda’s omnivorous curiosity and wide knowledge was everywhere evident in the classroom. But “Darwin” was her favorite. She found the preparation and teaching of this seminar “exhilarating,” and she treasured the chance to become “re-acquainted with Darwin himself—‘such a nice fellow,’ one of his enemies remarked.”² Connected to her passion for Darwin was her passion for the work of Stephen Jay Gould; indeed, one of the highlights of Rhoda’s career at Vassar was Gould’s 1985 visit to campus. In her activities report that year, she wrote of the “galvanic effect” Gould had on her students—and on her. “[H]is own vitality made *me* more vital in my classes—fizz is contagious...,” she noted happily. “In casual comments, Gould has stimulated my own thinking about the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, about science and history, and

¹ Henry Guerlac to Charles C. Griffin, November 21, 1960, uncatalogued, Vassar College History Department files “Rappaport, Rhoda, 1960-1970.”

² Uncatalogued, Vassar College History Department files, ‘Rappaport—Annual Reports,’ 12/83.

even about mortality. Even this pathetic attempt to sum up the effects of Gould's visit," she concluded, "puts *fizz* into my veins."³

Rhoda's passion for teaching everything from Darwin to Luther, from Napoleon to Laplace was reflected in her students' responses, which praised the "stimulating discussions" she led, her wit and dynamism, her "rigorous but fair" grading. Described by the 1975 History Majors' Committee as "one of the 'must' teachers" at Vassar, almost a decade later that committee concluded: "Every student said he/she would definitely, absolutely recommend Ms. Rappaport to other students."⁴

Rhoda cared no less passionately about books, and each summer she scoured the book fairs and shops in her beloved Paris to build what would become a most impressive collection. The result of her forays was an exceptionally rich collection of eighteenth-century French works. Rhoda generously donated a number of these to Vassar, including a 1781 edition of Voltaire's *Romans et contes* and a 1768 edition of Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de Musique*. Other volumes were given to Rhoda's Vassar colleagues by her sister after Rhoda's death.

Rhoda's scholarship was supported over the years by fellowships from the National Science Foundation and the American Council of Learned Societies. She published widely in such journals as *History of Science*, *The British Journal for the History of Science*, and *Isis*, but her most significant work was her book *When Geologists Were Historians, 1665-1750*, published by Cornell in 1997. Her last

³ Uncatalogued, Vassar College History Department files, 'Rappaport—Annual Reports,' 12/85.

⁴ Uncatalogued, Vassar College History Department files, "Rappaport Majors' Committee Reports."

project, on “catastrophism,” grew from her “long-standing concern with Noah’s Flood and the vocabulary of geological ‘revolutions.’” A final article, “Dangerous Words: Diluvialism, Neptunism, Catastrophism,” appeared in 2007.

The record allows us to glimpse Rhoda as teacher and scholar, but it cannot capture the unique spirit that Rhoda brought to the Department and the campus. For that we turn to our own memories—of her infectious delight in the idiosyncracies of students’ prose, her wonderfully droll sense of humor as she beheld the folly of human ambitions, her warm welcome of a new colleague as an intellectual equal in teaching the Department’s monumental, two-semester Freshman Course, her generous sharing of her spacious corner office with another new colleague. And there was *no one* who felt such a deep and abiding love for the Mets, especially Darryl Strawberry and Mookie Wilson, in their glory years of the mid-1980s.

Throughout her career, Rhoda was keenly aware of the difficulty of straddling two fields of inquiry, history and geology. In 1981, having been appointed a corresponding member of the International Committee for the History of Geology, she remarked with some dismay that “many geologists who enter the historical arena do so. . .without any awareness that history, like the sciences, is a discipline and not a hobby where any idiosyncratic notion will pass muster. . .I have sufficient standing to be elected to INHIGEO, but this does not mean that my work is understood by a large part of the audience that would presumably be concerned about what I have written and expect to write. As a result, I have an increased

feeling of isolation....”⁵ Given that feeling, she must have enjoyed a certain satisfaction when, two decades later, the Geological Society of London awarded her their Friedman Medal for “distinguished research in the history of the science.” The accompanying commendation praised *When Geologists were Historians* as a “superb survey of the practice of Earth sciences across Europe” in that era. Rhoda’s “research career,” the commendation continued, “has thrown light on a remarkably fertile period in our science’s history—a period when it can truly be said that new concepts modern geology takes for granted as its foundation stones were first conceived.”⁶

This past June Rhoda’s close friend Tom McGlinchey and I joined her family for the unveiling of her headstone at Temple Beth-El Cemetery in Pleasant Valley. That stone’s simple epitaph—“Rhoda Rappaport, Scholar and Teacher at Vassar College, 1961-2000”—succinctly captures the core of Rhoda’s being. We honor her memory here today.

Respectfully submitted,

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⁵ Uncatalogued, Vassar College History Department files, ‘Rappaport—Annual Reports,’ 4/81. The Oklahoma colleague she refers to in this passage is Professor Kenneth L. Taylor, in the Department of the History of Science at the University of Oklahoma.

⁶ <http://www.geolsoc.org.uk/gsl/society/history/page2984.html> (accessed July 14, 2010)