

Edna MacMahon, Woman of the Year 1975

Honored at the 50th Anniversary of AAUW in 1975

From the program of the celebration of this anniversary:

Dr. MacMahon graduated from Radcliffe College and did graduate work at Bryn Mawr, Columbia, and the Robert Brookings Graduate School. She received her Doctorate degree in 1930. She has been teaching at Vassar College in the Dept. of Economics, Sociology and Anthropology since 1942. She has been a professor since 1952.

Dr. MacMahon has had many papers and research published in the field of economics and has traveled abroad extensively studying other economic systems.

She is a member of the Board of Trustees of Dutchess Community College and is also a member of the Evaluation Committee of the local Office of Economic Opportunity,

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At a Meeting of the Faculty of Vassar College held
May ninth, nineteen hundred and eighty—four,
the following Memorial was unanimously adopted;

Edna Cers Macmahon, Professor Emeritus of Economics was born February 27, 1901 in Riga, Latvia, the daughter of John William and Alvia Julia Lischmann Cers. Her family emigrated to the United States when she was a child and she grew up on a farm in Massachusetts. Edna began her long career of community service by sharing with neighboring farmers helpful information from her careful reading of agricultural bulletins. A favorite teacher persuaded her to change her original plan of going to a normal school; instead, she entered Radcliffe at age 16, working her way through college. A seminar with Frederick Jackson Turner inspired her life-long fascination with the influence of the frontier and of geographic mobility upon American history.

At age 20 Edna began graduate work at Bryn Mawr on the Susan B. Anthony scholarship. The next summer, in 1922, she met her future Vassar colleague, Margaret Myers when they both led discussions groups at the School for Women Workers in Industry held at Bryn Mawr. When they learned that young women on strike at a Philadelphia clothing factory were being arrested illegally, they decided to provide publicity by getting themselves arrested at the strike site. With support from a young male friend from an Old Philadelphia family, they began interviewing the strikers on the picket line. The police hustled them off to the city jail where they briefly shared a cell with a young woman who called out cheerfully: "What are you in for? shoplifting?" The venture ended with a double standard in sentencing which left them furious; their male friend was fined, but the future Vassar economists were let off with nothing but an admonition.

In 1923 Columbia University appointed Edna as the first woman to hold its Gilder Research Fellowship. At Columbia she studied under Wesley Clark Mitchell, pioneer institutional economist, whose course on economic theory provided the framework for her thinking about economics. From her studies with

Mitchell and with two other famous institutionalists, Thorstein Veblen and John R. Commons, she drew the lesson that economists should be critics and shapers of the societies they study. In 1924 she accepted a fellowship from the newly-founded Robert Brookings Graduate School of Economics and Government, an experiment in studying at the intersection of theory and public policy. She received her Ph.D. in 1930 with a doctoral thesis on labor injunctions. While working toward her doctorate, she investigated child labor in Maryland and Delaware canneries for the Children's Bureau of the United States Department of Labor. She also worked for the District of Columbia Consumers' League in 1926 as it brought pressure for the enforcement of District laws on maximum hours for women. In 1927, while employed by the U. S. Chamber of Commerce, she began a study of immigration which continued subsequently for the Council on Foreign Relations. But with teaching her long-term goal, she was glad in 1929 to become an instructor of economics at Hunter College.

In that Year Edna married Arthur Whittier Macmahon then associate professor and subsequently Eaton professor of public administration at Columbia University. They had two children: Gail now living in Austria where her husband is a diplomat, and Alan, now a physicist at the University of Texas. During their childhood, the family lived in Croton where Edna helped run a cooperative school inspired by what remains durable in John Dewey's theories of education. She also ran an annual plant sale for the school notable for the stream of varied advice that accompanied her sales as she visualized each purchaser's plot, its probable disadvantages of soil or shade, and the owner's probable lack of time or knowledge.

In later years members of the Vassar community would benefit from Edna's advice on gardening and from the well-developed aesthetic imagination which informed it. That imagination could be seen in the gardens and houses she arranged, and especially in the beloved cottage at Lake Awosting with its wonderful relating of domestic comforts, works of craftsmanship, and the natural beauty of the setting.

While still at Croton in the late 1930s, Edna began to travel for research and for consulting assignments. In 1941-42 she served as Director of Research for the Division of Minimum Wage and Women in Industry of the New York State Department of Labor and also headed Economics unit in Consumer Division the Office of Price Administration.

Edna joined the Vassar faculty in 1942. At that time the Vassar economics department was part of a joint department, economics and sociology, which would shortly become the economics, sociology, and anthropology department—B.S.A. Edna found the philosophy of the department to her liking. Abstract theory was not for her—she always regarded economic problems in the context of the overall problems facing a society.

She described the introductory course in an article for the Alumnae magazine in 1949:

The teaching of economics at Vassar has always been directed, rather deliberately, toward a broad understanding of the economy as a whole, and to analysis and discussion of the major economic issues which confront our society. The introductory course, in particular, frankly aims to equip students to exercise their responsibility as citizens intelligently rather than to provide a mastery of economic principles. This does not mean that theory is neglected, but that it is constantly taught in relation to concrete problems to which it is applicable. The emphasis necessitates a continuous search for ways of making theory a more practicable tool in the analysis of current problems.

Under Edna's influence the department introduced an introductory interdisciplinary course for the joint department, a course which flourished for a number of years. Economists, sociologists, and anthropologists together prepared the year-long introductory course and a required senior seminar. Students majored in one discipline.

Edna's Special fields within economics reflected her philosophy- consumer economics ' American economic history, economic development. Her students were, in the Vassar tradition, encouraged to go to the original sources and these sources were often operating institutions in the community. Field trips to farms and factories were a regular part of Economics 105 and Poughkeepsie residents were surveyed on a variety of topics.

In the mid 1960s Edna worked with other faculty in the development of an interdisciplinary course on the river and its impact on those living around it. Her participation in the course was inspired by her long observation of the Hudson and her concern for it before "ecology" became a popular term.

A late colleague said he always wanted to follow Edna around with a tape recorder for she was a veritable fountain of ideas. But she was interested primarily in people and in doing. Although she published several journal articles, she never found enough time for her own research, especially for her study of Poughkeepsie shoemakers which was in advance of its time in methodology. Her tracing of craftsmen over time through census and city directories anticipated by more than a decade the historical social mobility studies which became important in the 1960s and 70s.

Edna retired from Vassar in 1966, but continued her teaching in the State University of New York for three years. Her already extensive activity in the community beyond the College increased. She had been a trustee of Dutchess Community College from its founding in 1957, playing a major role in setting policy during its formative period. She served on the Board for seventeen years, until 1974.

In government, she served on the Advisory Committee to the Consumer Counsel to the Governor of New York and, in Dutchess County, on its committees on tax policy and on economic opportunity.

Politically, she was an active member of the League of Women Voters and of both the Vassar Democratic Club and the Dutchess County Women's Democratic Club.

She delivered countless addresses to community groups, ranging from the Dutchess County Council on World Affairs to the Newcomers' Home Bureau Club, from the Anti-Defamation League to the YWCA, and from the Poughkeepsie Business and Professional Women's Club to the Dutchess County Grange Tax Committee. The topics of these talks expressed the range of her concerns: consumer economics, anti-poverty programs, county planning for water and land development, integration and quality in education, and travels with her husband in Europe, Africa, and Asia. Also expressive of her concerns was her membership in the Poughkeepsie Friends Meeting.

Bowdoin Park, on Poughkeepsie's bank of the Hudson, is an abiding embodiment of Edna Macmahon's care for the land and for the people of the place where she lived for nearly three decades. There, the Edna Macmahon Trail for the study of nature commemorates her leadership in reclaiming an abandoned waterfront for the use of the community.

In 1978 Edna moved to Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, where she died on July 24, 1983.

When thinking of Edna Macmahon, the word that comes to mind is mobilize. Those who knew her as neighbors and friends will never forget her ability to mobilize people for worthy causes through persuasion, through picnics, through lively conversation and abundant snacks at tea or cocktail time. Tea at the Macmahans came to symbolize Edna's unique ability to fuse the scholarly and intellectual with community service and action and to join together college and community in common causes.

Respectfully submitted,

Clyde Griffen
John Glasse
Natalie Marshall