

Memorial Minute for Jean Higgins
Read by Richard Unsworth, Faculty Meeting February 1, 2012

A Memorial Minute for Jean Higgins
12/10/1928 – 9/12/2010
Smith College Faculty member from 1973 until her retirement in 1991

I am honored to offer this memorial minute for our colleague, Professor of Religion Emeritus Jean Higgins, who died on September 12th 2010.

When one spoke with her a first time, it took but a minute to sense that she has born and raised in Scotland, and not much longer to know that she was endowed with a Scot's sense of humor and a very generous attitude toward her peers—two important survival skills for one who grew up in a very large family. She was 8th of the 12 children.

Jean took her BA at the University of Cape Town, then her MA and PhD at Marquette University; but she would say she took her education on two islands and five continents.

She joined the Smith College religion department in 1973, there to teach the History of Christian Thought, a team-taught course on World Religions, and other offerings from her own research. One of those, her course on “The Myth of Eve”, was a very popular one among Smith students. It also brought considerable attention from her peers in the American Academy of Religion.

Jean was an astute and meticulous scholar, one who found ever-wider boundaries for her work. Her conversations with Professor Taitetsu Uno gave rise to her interest in Christianity's role in Asia. Thanks to an opportunity as a teaching fellow at Doshisha University in Kyoto, she taught there a course on Eastern and Western perspectives on religion and literature. While in Japan, she also developed research and publications on the Japanese Roman Catholic novelist, Endo Shusaku. She brought those interests back to Smith on her return.

Jean was a uniquely engaging teacher, one who had found out-of-the-ordinary ways to garner student participation in the classroom dialogue. The combination of a lively classroom, a cosmopolitan personal background and creative scholarly interests meant that her courses were typically over-subscribed.

She cheerfully accepted the obligations of the academic citizen, serving her term as chair of our department, giving two years of service as assistant to President Jill Conway, and sitting on who knows how many faculty committees. The fact that she was asked to participate on several *ad hoc* arbitration committees suggests the regard her peers had for her.

Ill health demanded that Jean retire in 1991, earlier than she wished. Those of you who attended the Commencement ceremonies that year heard President Mary Dunn announce that Jean and her colleague and husband, Quentin Quesnell, had been jointly recognized with the College's Honored Professor Award. The last years of her life were severely burdened with immobility, but when I had a final brief visit with her, the beauty of her spirit and the good cheer in her soul was as fully present as ever. That is what we can best remember when her name comes to mind.

Richard P. Unsworth