

Communications

IN MEMORY-RACHEL SARGENT ROBINSON

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Rachel Robinson was born Rachel Louisa Sargent in Methuen, Massachusetts on February 10, 1891. She died in Cincinnati on December 18, 1977. One of a large family, she early exhibited that self-reliance and pluck which marked her throughout her long life. Even as an undergraduate at Bates College in Maine she was supporting herself by teaching Latin and Greek in district schools. She taught too while pursuing graduate studies at the University of Illinois, from which she received her Ph.D. in Classics in 1923. But although she was a devoted alumna of Illinois and looked back upon that circle of faculty and students, presided over by William Abbott Oldfather, with affection and reverence, she remained nevertheless a thorough New Englander in her attitudes and *mores*.

As a scholar and teacher, Rachel Robinson had three careers. After receiving her doctorate, she taught Classics at North Central College in Naperville, Illinois until 1928 and, as Associate Professor, at Western Reserve in Cleveland (1929-31). Her brilliant doctoral dissertation on slavery in Athens during the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. had enabled her to win a Guggenheim fellowship for study and travel in Greece, providing an interlude between teaching positions which was one of the happiest periods in her life. During her last years, when she was often bed-ridden, she would relive these travels in the still primitive Greek countryside, and later ones in Italy and Spain, with almost total recall.

Her second career began in 1931 with her marriage to Rodney Potter Robinson, whom she had known since their days as graduate students at Illinois. He had become Professor of Classics in the University of Cincinnati. She took up her position as faculty wife with characteristic energy, encouraging and assisting her husband in his scholarly projects and helping him to overcome his almost painful shyness. The affectionate

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tributes he paid her in his books are testimony of this effective partnership. Soon after their marriage they spent two busy and rewarding years (1935-37) in Rome where he served as Professor in Charge of the Classical School of the American Academy. When, returned to Cincinnati, he became Dean of the Graduate School, she happily discharged the additional obligations which this position imposed upon them. The graduate students in Classics at Cincinnati in the late 'thirties remember her with gratitude as the organizer and leading spirit of the Greek reading circle which met weekly in the Robinson home. Her empathy with the ancients, her intimate knowledge of Greek, and the felicity and liveliness of her translations made these evenings a pure delight.

In 1941 Rodney Robinson suffered a near-fatal heart attack. For the following nine years his life hung by so precarious a thread that it was a question of survival from one day to the next. He faced this ordeal cheerfully and courageously. And Rachel devoted herself to his welfare, a bulwark of strength, even though she was even then racked by the terrifying attacks of asthma which tormented her for the last thirty years of life. Later her misery was compounded by the new and drastic remedies her doctors prescribed for her ailment; the long-range side effects of the treatment were responsible for her increasing vulnerability.

Rachel resumed her own scholarly pursuits after the loss of her husband in 1950. Confronted once again with the necessity of looking after herself, she resolved to resume her work as scholar and teacher. Her first objective was the completion of a revised and much enlarged version of an earlier work, "The Story of Greek Athletics" (1927), which she had undertaken with the blessing and help of Professor Oldfather. Her "Sources for the History of Greek Athletics" appeared in 1955 and, recommended by its highly interesting contents and its rigorous scholarship, it soon became a standard text in courses on ancient athletics in colleges and universities throughout the English-speaking world. Not satisfied with what she had accomplished, almost immediately she began work on a more comprehensive history of the subject which would include the Roman period to late antiquity. The writing of her "chapters," as she called them, occupied her thoughts and engaged her free time to the day of her death. Much of the new work was finished, but it remains in manuscript. The knowledge that her book was appreciated by authorities in the field and was in wide use provided her chief pleasure during her last years: in a very real sense, her book had become her life.

Because she had so enjoyed the teaching she had done before her marriage and felt, as well, that she must add to her income, she returned to the classroom in the nineteen fifties, at an age when most people are looking toward retirement. This return was facilitated by academic

friends who admired her spirit and talents and recognized her competency. In succession she accepted positions at Ohio State University, the University of Oklahoma, and Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. She was a magnificent teacher. She regarded each meeting of a class as a performance for which she prepared as if she were the protagonist in a continuing drama. Her students responded to her own love of learning and enthusiasm for all things of the mind. Many of them kept in touch with her for years after their brief encounter in the classroom. They knew that they had been in the presence of an extraordinary personality.

When her infirmities had made it impossible for her to maintain herself alone, Rachel Robinson went to live at St. Margaret Hall in Cincinnati. There for nearly three years she received loving attention and the respect which she firmly believed was due her as a Professor of Classics. She was fortunate also in having a number of loyal friends who visited her regularly and were more often than not cheered and renewed by the person they had come to cheer. She is survived by her brother, Lester, in Savannah, Georgia.