

**Memorial Minute for Joan Bramwell, October 28, 2020 Faculty Meeting  
Written and Read by Dean Flower, Professor Emeritus of English Language & Literature**

Joan Maxwell Bramwell, who retired from the English Department in 1992 and died last June, began her teaching career in Paris at the Lycée Camille Sée—a secondary school for girls which was a bold enterprise when it was founded in 1935 ( Simone de Beauvoir once taught there). Joan had attended Lady Margaret Hall, one of Oxford’s two famous colleges for women, and taken an honors degree in Modern Languages, concentrating in French, in 1945. Her years at Oxford were marked by her vigils on church rooftops during the Blitz, prepared to put out fires from flying embers with her pail of water and a hose.

Before that Joan Maxwell was “head girl” in her London grammar school. She grew up in a traditional English family. Her son Tony explained recently, “What she got from her beloved parents, Arnold and Florence, was a belief in God (a Church of England tea-and-cakes variety) and a patriotism to king and country (her experience in the Blitz and her father’s being in the trenches for most of WWI.)”. Small wonder that she never lost her clipped English accent.

After a year in Paris, where food was rationed but empty bottles could be exchanged for five liters of wine per week, Joan went back to Oxford, to earn a very practical MA degree—the Diploma in Education. Now twenty-four years old she found a job as a lecturer in English at the University of Helsinki, a place she loved and remained for five years. She was joined there by Vincent Rossell, a refugee from Franco’s Spain whom she had met in France. They were married in 1948, had a son (“Antonio”) in 1949, and promptly divorced. Her memories of Finland, as told to her son years later, included crayfish, vodka, and saunas with her Finnish colleagues, “the gloom of half light and huge banks of snow” in the city, and crossing to Stockholm by taxi over the Baltic ice. It was here she began composing an English/Finnish dictionary, and here too that she met Daniel Aaron, who was on sabbatical leave from Smith, teaching American literature at the University for the academic year of 1950-51—a stroke of good fortune for Joan, as it turned out.

In 1952 she met and married James Bramwell, a would-be novelist. Despite Joan's recent promotion to assistant professor, they left Helsinki in 1954 to live in the warm south of France, choosing the village of Saint Jacques de Grasse, not far from Cannes. For a few years Joan led a sort of *vie de bohème* among a group of eccentric British expats—retired admirals and spy masters, idlers living grandly on inheritances, including one who kept a cheetah. Joan worked on her Finnish dictionary, learned French cuisine, and went occasionally on picnics to secluded beaches aboard Aristotle Onassis's yacht. In 1957 Joan accepted an offer from Smith College, curtesy of Daniel Aaron, to be a visiting lecturer in the English Department for a year, accompanied by James who would work on a novel, and by her son Tony. It was the same year that Sylvia Plath, accompanied by her poet-husband Ted Hughes, returned to her alma mater to teach. Plath did not much like the Bramwells, recording in her Journals that she asked James bluntly, "Do you really hate it here so much?" And depicting Joan, "the pale British Joan, [with] green-rimmed spectacles, green painted fingernails . . . [and] great dangling gold Aztec earrings, shaped like cubist angels." Reading that decades later, Joan was greatly amused. Before the year was up, she had to evict James from her life; he was an incurable narcissist and philanderer. They were divorced the following year. The newly-married Plath could not decipher Joan's reticent behavior (finding her "silent" and "too slim" for James), but she saw James clearly as a poor writer and "a broken man, his craggy sallow face" expressive of all his failures.

Joan and Tony, now almost ten, went back to France in 1958. She decided to prepare for a regular appointment at Smith by going back to Oxford for another degree, the MA in English literature. When they returned, Tony remembers, "Joan and I were essentially adopted by Dan Aaron and his family. They shared Christmases and Wellfleet on the Cape [where the Aarons had a summer home], celebrated the Kennedy election night together, and Janet's kitchen was seemingly filled with finches flying free." They also delighted in Janet's two large boisterous poodles. 1959 was also the year Thomas C. Mendenhall became Smith's president. Joan always liked him, Tony recalls, for "his eccentricity, his loud

tweeds, and his generosity of spirit.” For his part President Mendenhall admired Joan’s “quite unusual and effective combination of firm will, clear head, and kind heart.” He appointed her a Class Dean in 1967, a student advisory role she took on frequently in the years to come.

Her teaching ranged widely from General Literature 291 and English 207 (The History of English Literature) to courses in creative writing, the teaching of secondary school English, and the 19th Century English novel. She also gave seminars on metaphysical poetry, tragedy, narrative and epic poetry, and Dickens. She was invaluable in the English Department as an advisor for study abroad, drawing on her personal knowledge of English and Continental universities. For twenty-six years, beginning in the mid-1960s, Joan was a fiction editor for The Massachusetts Review, reading and evaluating manuscript submissions and using her wide knowledge of contemporary English, French, and American fiction. Her son sums up her career this way:

Looking back, I feel that Joan finally found her place at Smith. Like the cat she essentially was, she settled into the warmth and security it offered her. . She found her sustenance surrounded by intelligent women. She loved the company of men, but her marriages with artistic self-obsessed husbands were unhappy affairs. She valued her academic colleagues, but her dearest friends were women. I cite among them Jackie Pritzen, Helen Vendler, and Peggy Shook.

Jackie Pritzen was clearly a kindred spirit from the start. She did graduate work at Yale and spent two years at Girton College, Cambridge, before coming to teach English at Smith in 1959, exactly when Joan returned. Helen Vendler, who taught at Smith from 1964 to 1966, also became a lifelong friend. In a recent letter she remembered Joan as

a delighted reader of novels and poetry, with flawless taste. She also rejoiced in reading the yearly record of Lady Margaret Hall, especially the obits, which were full of aristocratic memorials to Lady X and Abbess Y. She was reticent to a degree, in her English way, but like George Herbert, she was never “loath to spend

[her] judgement.” She was a witty critic of the passing scene, and gifted in academic derision when it was deserved.

Helen also appreciated Joan’s skill in embroidery, her expertise at puzzles, her love of cats, and above all the fact “that she was an exquisite cook, a skill learned from her years living in France.”

Her closest friend of all was Peggy Shook, who came to the English Department in 1960. They shared a love of Victorian writers, Virginia Woolf, children’s literature, crossword puzzles, word games, mystery novels, ghost stories, and the nonsense rhymes of Edward Lear. Joan clearly delighted in Peggy’s bursts of creativity—writing fiction and poetry both funny and serious, and she was Peggy’s perfect audience for it. They were both cheerfully sardonic about academic follies, particularly those of complacent male colleagues.

Joan remained in Northampton after her retirement, and could still be seen zipping around town in her faded blue Volkswagen Beetle. It was the counterpart of the quirky old Citroën 2CV without a back seat she had in Grasse. It smelled of the chickens which the previous owner used to take to market. She and James used it to climb into the Alps and collect wild plants, carefully wrapping them in mosses. In America the 2CV was replaced by a DKW two-stroke, bought because it was mimosa yellow (her favorite color) and had to abandon in the gentle Massachusetts hills it was too feeble to climb. Joan made regular trips to England and France to visit her son and grandchildren, refusing to let them call her grandma, and never really thought of herself as old. “I never imagined living beyond the age of sixty,” she said when she was ninety five.

Dean Flower (rev. 6 May 2020)