

Memorial Minute for Elizabeth Von Klemperer
Read by William Oram at the November 11, 2015 Faculty Meeting.

Betty von Klemperer died on October 13th, peacefully, at the home of her daughter Cathy Utzschneider. She was lucid to the end, Cathy said, and able to read until her last week. After that she recited Yeats to herself. If you'd like a balanced account of her life, you should read the superb obituary in the Hampshire Gazette. I'll talk mostly about her life at Smith.

If I were to do an allegorical painting of Betty I'd place her in the middle of the canvas with a somewhat forbidding New England ancestor to one side of her and a Frenchman—perhaps La Rochfoucault, perhaps Baudelaire, whom she loved, on the other. She was born in 1923 to an old New England family; one of her great grandfathers became a New Hampshire congressman. But when she was a year old the family moved to France, and French, which she spoke beautifully, became a second mode of being. These two strains were powerfully formative: her new England heritage created a person who was self-controlled, deeply moral and committed to duty; the French heritage spoke to the other side of her that was passionately literate and often wickedly witty. At times the wit that the New England side of her might repress, was expressed in French: I remember her speaking about the “je-m'en-foutisme” of a colleague who preferred not to return his papers on time.

She returned to the States when she was seven, and eventually came to Smith, majoring in English. While an undergraduate she was recruited as a code breaker for the U.S. Navy, and after graduating in 1944 went to Washington to work for two years in a cryptanalysis unit. This earned her a national medal of distinction although, very characteristically, she pooh-poohed its importance. Her work was, however, classified, and I remember her beloved husband Klemens saying with equal degrees of bafflement and admiration that she would never tell him what she had discovered. Betty took her commitment to silence seriously, as she did all her commitments.

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In 1946 she began a Ph.D. in English Literature at Radcliffe, eventually spending a year in Paris on a Fulbright, working on Anglo-French literary relations. When she returned to the States in 1949, she took a position at Smith, where she would continue for the next forty-four years, becoming a full professor in 1977 and eventually the Esther Cloudman Dunn Professor of English. She was one of the best lecturers I've ever heard, with a comprehensive range of knowledge and a remarkable precision of language. Her voice was resonant, modulated, and intelligent, able to bring out the fullest meaning of the poetry she read. It was a patrician voice, which she used in the service of the writers she loved. She had a special gift for directing senior theses, judging what a student could do and helping her to define a question that would enable her best work. Betty's mastery of French and English and her ease with German meant that she became a central figure in the fledgling Comparative Literature Program. One of her signature courses, *Imagination and the City*, brought together Balzac and Baudelaire, Dickens, Conrad and Henry James as they reimagined the urban transformations of the 19th century.

She was a member of the Smith community in many ways. She served on many major committees. With her husband the German historian Klemens von Klemperer, whom she met and married at Smith, and with whom she had two loved children, she was an extraordinarily generous host and friend, a giver of wonderful and seemingly effortless dinner parties. She was also an invaluable mentor to younger faculty members. In the toxic and fragmented English Department that I knew in the 1970s, she remained clear-eyed, helpful and compassionate, and when she became Chair in 1978 she initiated steps that moved the Department toward increased sanity and mutual respect.

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I picture her riding to work every day on her bicycle, small and indomitable. She was one of the few selfless people I've known. When Klemens published an autobiography, some objected that it mentioned Betty so little, but they forgot that Betty edited that book as she did all his work, and would have edited out the self-reference. She was a passionate lover of the material world, a gardener, a magnificent French cook, a knitter, an omnicompetent person. She could tell you how to make a superb pâté or keep woolens from shrinking, or talk about the treatment of the body in Victor Hugo long before bodies in literature became a modish subject. And she was much loved. When I wrote a friend about her death he wrote back "This news breaks my heart."

-- Bill Oram