

Memorial Minute for Jill Ker Conway

Written by Susan C. Bourque, read by Charles Staelin at the November 14, 2018 Faculty Meeting

On June 1, 2018, Jill Ker Conway, the 7th President of Smith College and its first woman President, died peacefully at her home in Boston following an illness. She was 83 years old.

Born in the outback of Australia and educated at the University of Sydney and at Harvard, Conway came to Smith following a successful term as the first woman Vice President at the University of Toronto. While in Toronto she set about addressing the needs of women—both students and faculty. She established a day care program to assist women with children, and sought gender equity in faculty salaries and promotion policies. She brought those same concerns to Smith when she arrived on campus in the summer of 1975. During her ten years at Smith, Conway advanced and expanded the Ada Comstock Scholars program, established the Project on Women and Social Change, championed women's athletics and enhanced Smith's athletic facilities, expanded the career services office, and perhaps most notably, tripled the size of Smith's endowment through tireless fundraising. She was named one of Time magazine's *Women of the Year* in 1975.

During her years as President, Jill moved Smith from a somewhat self-satisfied, intellectually comfortable member of the Seven Sisters, to a vibrant, innovative and energized institution with a creative faculty, poised to do the important work of preparing young women for leadership in a rapidly changing environment. She is correctly viewed as a transformative leader, deeply committed to the cause of women's education and similarly appreciative of the critical role of women's colleges in advancing the education of women.

Conway joined a number of corporate boards during her time as President. Not having gone to school with an "old boys network" of well-connected friends who had gone on to Wall Street careers, Jill accepted appointments to boards where she could learn how the corporate world operated and what skills Smith graduates would need to succeed in that world.

Jill had a powerful intellect and was an accomplished historian. Her early work focused on the role of educated women as social reformers in early 20th century America. Along with Natalie Zemon Davis,

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she created one of the first courses on women's history that she taught, both at Toronto and at Smith, to eager students and colleagues who flocked to her courses. She was a demanding teacher who could weave together a complex tale of political intrigue with an analysis of economic forces and historical trends, and she could create a compelling counter narrative to the accepted theories or "conventional wisdom" on a given topic. She always challenged her audience, whether alums or undergraduates, to think anew, to reconsider what they might have viewed as settled questions. For those of us who were young feminists on the faculty—both women and men—this was heady, wonderful stuff. When she lectured—whether to undergraduates or alumnae, it was always her goal to bring us to some new insight, some new perspective, or some refreshing doubts about what we had considered settled matters.

Jill brought those same skills to the corporate and non-profit worlds as she carved out yet another career of leadership in the years following the Smith presidency. Whether it was in a classroom or a Boardroom, that quiet voice insisted on seeing the world in refreshing ways and imagining how our efforts could assist others.

After her term as President, Conway held an appointment in MIT's Program in Science, Technology and Society until 2011. She continued her service as a Director of Nike, Merrill Lynch, Colgate Palmolive, IBM and the Lend Lease Corporation. She also continued on the boards of a number of nonprofit institutions, including the Knight and Kresge Foundations and the John F. Kennedy Library. She served as a Trustee for the Harvard University Board of Overseers, Hampshire and Mount Holyoke Colleges, Northfield Mt. Hermon School and the Clarke School for the Deaf.

At the same time, she also became a best-selling author with her autobiographical trilogy: *The Road from Coorain*, perhaps most properly seen as a love song to her native land, *True North*, and *A Women's Education*. With a lifelong interest in how women tell the story of their lives, she edited three volumes of women's autobiographical writing, drawing together narratives of women's experiences from around the world. She also wrote a scholarly book on memoir, *When Memory Speaks*, and both edited and

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contributed to a number of academic books including, *The Politics of Women's Education*, *Women, Technology and Social Change*, and *Earth, Air, Fire, Water: Humanistic Studies of the Environment*.

A committed environmentalist, Jill was passionate about the preservation of the New England landscape. She gave her personal and financial support to the creation of Smith's MacLeish Field station and the Franklin County Land Trust. Jill loved the landscape of New England and half her ashes now rest next to John in the Pine Grove cemetery in her beloved Conway, Massachusetts, while the other half are mixed with the restless red dust of Australia's western plains.

During the last ten years of her life, Jill took on the crisis of homelessness, particularly among veterans. In 2016, Community Solutions honored her contributions by dedicating the John and Jill Ker Conway Residence for chronically homeless veterans and low-income residents in Washington, D.C.

Jill received honorary degrees from 40 universities and colleges in the United States, Australia and Canada. In 2013, President Obama presented her with the *National Humanities Medal*, and, in the same year, Jill was awarded Australia's highest honor, *Companion of the Order of Australia* by the Governor General of Australia, Quentin Bryce.

A beloved figure on the Smith campus and a trusted colleague and advisor to subsequent Smith Presidents, Jill Conway continued to support the College in myriad ways, most recently serving as one of the honorary chairs of the 450 million dollar Capital Campaign. She loved the College and took enormous pleasure in Smith's honors and achievements. A frequent visitor to campus, she was much sought after as a speaker at alumnae gatherings across the country. She endeared herself to each new generation of Smithies and maintained throughout her life a rich circle of friends from her Smith years. As her dear friend, Natalie Zemon Davis, Smith' 49 wrote to us this fall: "Now her dear voice is stilled, but her legacy of love, aspiration, courage, and generosity lives on to sustain us."