

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 1, 2014, the following tribute to the life and service of the late Wallace MacCaffrey was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **WALLACE TREVETHIC MACCAFFREY**

BORN: April 20, 1920  
DIED: December 13, 2013

Wallace MacCaffrey, Francis Lee Higginson Professor of History, *Emeritus*, began his twenty-two year career at Harvard in 1968. He served as department chair twice, during 1972-1974 and 1979- 1982. As the relationship among students, faculty, and administration slowly changed, MacCaffrey was trusted by all. He had an open, friendly personality and was completely loyal to Harvard.

That loyalty was a product of his graduate work, which he undertook after having served in the army during the last phases of World War II. He had graduated from Reed College in 1942, where he had developed a strong interest in, and aptitude for, historical study. During the war, his army service included an assignment to interrogate Italian prisoners who had been brought to New York. Due to that experience and because he gained a proficiency in the language, MacCaffrey developed a strong interest in Italian history. As a graduate student at Harvard, however, he focused on the study of British history. His principal advisor was Professor W. K. Jordan, a specialist in Tudor and Stuart era England, and he wrote his dissertation on the city of Exeter from 1540 to 1640. The dissertation was published in 1958 and established his reputation as a meticulous scholar of political institutions and personnel as they guided the fortunes of an urban community. His work became a model for numerous similar studies.

The concern with institutional details and with the overall question of governance remained MacCaffrey's scholarly preoccupation for the rest of his life, and he subsequently published what specialists consider a definitive account of Queen Elizabeth's reign in three volumes, in 1968, 1981, and 1992. These books showed how England escaped the turmoil of its mid-Tudor crisis and built the political and governmental practices and personal loyalties on which its stability came to rest. They were based upon a thorough study of the archival materials, including the papers of foreign embassies. His unique perspective was to set Elizabethan England into a European context. For his contributions to scholarship, he received the American Historical Association's Award for Scholarly Distinction in 2004. It may be noted that during the years when MacCaffrey published his Elizabethan trilogy,

from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, other historians were becoming interested in incorporating methods and concepts adopted from the social sciences or from literary theory and to write what was called “revisionist” history. He steadfastly refused to be swayed by such currents and kept to his own ways. As John Morrill, a leading scholar of early modern British history at Cambridge, has noted, “[MacCaffrey] reported what he found, and almost everything he wrote...will stand the test of time and be as vital and load-bearing in fifty years’ time. . . . [He] will be read as history [and not] as historiography.”

In his teaching, however, MacCaffrey was anything but narrowly focused, methodologically or topically. At Haverford College, where he taught from 1953 to 1968, he was one of only two historians on the faculty, and he was responsible for teaching all periods and subjects of European history from ancient Greece to the first half of the twentieth century. He was as authoritative in discussing medieval feudalism as in explaining nineteenth-century liberalism, as at home teaching a seminar on the Puritan Revolution as discussing Bolshevism in his survey course. He encouraged, or rather demanded, that students expose themselves to as much primary material as possible, and he would reject any paper based solely on secondary work. He was willing to guide a student in such a way that a C-level paper could be transformed into an A product. Thanks to his rigorous and generous mentorship, several of his students at Haverford College would eventually decide to follow in his footsteps and become professional historians. Even toward the end of his life, as he lay in bed or sat in a wheelchair, he would cheerfully reminisce about those former students.

At Harvard, he continued to be an inspiring teacher and a generous mentor to College students, for which he received the prize for undergraduate teaching. At the same time, for the first time in his career he trained numerous graduate students, many of whom have since become distinguished historians of early modern Britain. His Harvard years were sadly marred by the death of his wife, Isabel Gamble, who had taught English literature at Bryn Mawr before moving to Tufts University when he accepted a professorship at Harvard. Subsequently, she joined the faculty of Harvard’s Department of English. It was in part because he could not bear the idea of continuing to live in Cambridge without his wife that he decided to move to Cambridge, England, almost as soon as he retired. It may also be that in his deepest heart he felt himself to be English; both his parents came from England, his scholarship centered on England, and he even led alumni tours in the Midlands. He lived his retirement years in a wonderful, typically English house in Girton, Cambridgeshire. From there he daily commuted to the Cambridge University Library to do research and, toward the end of his life, just to read and mingle with students and faculty who knew him. His house had a lovely garden, tending which was one of his real pleasures, and his neighbors and friends (including George and Zara Steiner) would frequently visit to keep him company.

Till the very end, he remained mentally alert and psychologically cheerful even as he suffered from serious physical ailments. He continued to speak fondly of Reed and

Haverford Colleges, and of Harvard, and when one of us saw him for the last time in November 2013, he said he was concerned by the news that MIT seemed to have been ranked ahead of Harvard. Coming from small beginnings in La Grande, Oregon, he bequeathed to us a life as full of love of learning as of teaching.

Respectfully submitted,

Bernard Bailyn  
Mark Kishlansky  
David Harris Sacks (Reed College)  
Akira Iriye, Chair