

Pearl Sydenstricker Buck



Randolph-Macon Woman's College Class of 1914

Years Around the Even Post: Pearl S. Buck and Her Alma Mater

Joy Elizabeth Abbot Class of 1992

Pearl S. Buck. What can I say about a woman whom I have never met, yet is someone who has had incredible influence in my life. She is the primary reason that I even visited Randolph-Macon in the first place. When I had full intentions of never setting foot onto a woman's college campus, my mother's interest in Buck brought me here. After only one year here, I found myself on the Pearl Buck Centennial Symposium Committee where I suggested that somebody should look into finding out about the years she spent at Randolph-Macon. I became that somebody, and ever since then very few days have gone by that I have not thought about her.

At first she lingered in my thoughts because I feared having to give a speech, then it became an interesting venture into a part of her that was very special to me. This incredible woman and I share a common bond, Randolph-Macon. A stronger bond in the fact that she, like me, is an Even. The Even/Odd rivalry is a R-MWC tradition which has continued for nearly one hundred years. Evens are represented by the Even Post located on front campus several feet from the Main Hall steps. The year in which you graduate determines whether you are an Odd or an Even.

Buck graduated in 1914, thus making her an Even. These bonds, perhaps, can only be fully understood by those who share them. And I can only attempt to convey the uniqueness of these bonds to those of you who are unfamiliar with the traditions of Randolph-Macon. However, I am sure you will find her accomplishments, such as being voted Junior Class president and later her induction into Phi Beta Kappa, universal signs of measuring the successes and failures she experienced while at Randolph-Macon. There is so much about her that has been analyzed by scholars; there is so much about her that is still misunderstood. But I have dug into a part of her life that I do understand, and it is an understanding worth conveying. The four years she spent at Randolph-Macon are only a small slice of her life, yet the relationships she developed in those few years were strong enough to continue for the rest of her life and strong enough to keep her returning to the Even Post.

This relationship began when Pearl was still in her teens. Unlike most eighteen year old American women of her time, Pearl had been living in China, only returning to the states to attend college. Of course, in 1910, a college education itself was not common among American woman, but it was important to the Sydenstricker family.

Her father, Absalom Sydenstricker, had attended Washington and Lee University and had taken his family to China on missionary work, and it was time now for Pearl not only to further her education, but also regain a sense of American culture, a culture almost as foreign to her as Chinese culture would be to most of us. Pearl had a strong desire to attend Wellesley, but her southern relatives were strongly opposed to the idea of her attending "Northern Yankee" college. Randolph-Macon was chosen not simply because of its geography, because Pearl refused to attend a southern finishing school, but more importantly because it provided the academic structure she desired, with requirements equivalent to that of men's colleges. That is to say that there were no home economic or sewing classes offered; schedules were designed based on the philosophy that "any educated woman can read a cookbook or follow a dress pattern" (*My Several Worlds*, 91).

Before her arrival, her mother, Carie, hired a Chinese tailor to make her a new wardrobe, yet these clothes would never meet the standards of her American peers. This, combined with her lack of understanding of living in American culture, would make her initial experiences at Randolph-Macon very difficult. She arrived in Lynchburg unable to compare her new surroundings favorably with the beauty of China.

"I found my college to be a collection of red brick buildings, still new enough to look raw, at least to my eyes accustomed to years of the finest and most cultivated scenery in the world. . . . Within those buildings there was no beauty to be found, and the minimum even of comfort" (My Several Worlds, 91).



She arrived as an outsider. She lived in West Hall, as did Emma Edmunds, a woman who was to become a lifelong friend of Pearl's.

Emma recalls their initial meeting at R-MWC:



"I remember my first day at college . . . the girls all seemed at home and so sophisticated, and I felt so countrified. Then I saw this one girl and she looked even more countrified than me. Her dress was made of Chinese grass linen and nobody else had anything like that. . . . Pearl looked terribly different. I felt sorry for her, somehow, I knew how she felt, and so I dared speak to her. That's how we met" (Stirling, 24).

Pearl grew up in comfortable surroundings. Although her family was far from affectionate, saying good-bye to her parents at Christmas time of her freshmen year until graduation did not come easily. Even though her brother Edgar lived in Lynchburg, his shaky marriage provided her with little security, and upon her parents' departure, she found herself very alone.

Adding to her loneliness was the fact that the other students did not attempt to understand her differences or show any interest in Chinese culture, at least not outside the classroom. But rather than succumb to her loneliness, she decided to act against it. And in order to relate better with the other students, Pearl realized she would have to become more like them, more Americanized.



"I wanted to belong to my own kind and to belong, as I soon saw, meant that I must separate my two worlds again. I must learn to talk about the things that American girls talked about, boys and dances and sororities and so on, and I must look like them, and above all I must conceal the fact that inside me was a difference that I could not escape, even if I would" (My Several Worlds, 92).

She started first with her wardrobe. She earned money tutoring slow learners and was able to purchase clothes which made her feel more comfortable and able to fit in better with her peers. She began to adopt their manners of verbal expression, and "even such fads as sleeping late and skipping breakfast" (Stirling, 26). Pearl remarked, "Externally I became an American. I learned the proper slang and exclamations, and by the end of my freshman year, I was indistinguishable from any other girl of my age and class. And so I joined my world" (*My Several Worlds*, 93).

Beyond her goal of fitting in, she also became an active part of the school. When, as a freshman, Emma had entered a sorority, Pearl was hurt.

But this did motivate her to get more involved. She joined the Franklin Literary Society, a society which conducted dramatic readings and encouraged student writing competition. She maintained membership all four years. She wrote a short Christmas story for *The Tattler*, the college's literary magazine, titled "The Real Santa Claus." This published work was a continuation of her affection for writing, fulfilled passionately during her Macon years and throughout the rest of her life.



Her sophomore year proved even more promising. She became sophomore class treasurer, which enabled her to be the sophomore representative to the student governing body. During this time she also wrote a short story titled "By the Hand of a Child," for the *Helianthus*, the Randolph-Macon Woman's College yearbook. Throughout this time she continued writing for *The Tattler*, publishing "Village by the Sea" and "America's Position in Music and Art." Her writings were a constant reflection of her religious and Chinese cultural upbringing.

During her sophomore year she also displayed her Even spirit by playing a prank on the Odds. Pearl, Emma, and some of their Even friends decided to sabotage an Undersea party which the Odds were planning. They purchased an old sack of fish and "that night Pearl dressed up as an old fisherman with a beard and a pack on her back and went to the Odds' party and dropped one of those awful fish in every net" (Stirling, 27) which the Odds had set up as decoration.

Pearl describes her third year in her autobiography:



"By my junior year I was sufficiently American to be elected president of my class, and then I had really to identify myself with my college mates in fairness to them. That was the best year of my college life and I enjoyed it. Other honors came my way, I do not remember them all now, but they had their part in my happiness and I was too innocent or young or unconcerned to realize that many honors do not make one better loved" (My Several Worlds, 95).

This was evident as she was later described by a fellow classmate, Bess Wright. She and other students had "regarded Pearl Sydenstricker with envy, admiration and curiosity" (Diehl, A-6). And Wright stressed that even with Pearl's accomplishments she was still generally well liked among the student body, because "college students rarely elect those for whom they have no personal liking" (Diehl, A-6). Wright went on to say that "the somewhat colorless appearance belied the personality, and that the reserved manner indicated no lack of friendliness" (Diehl, A-6).

As junior class president, she was also a member of the Student Committee.



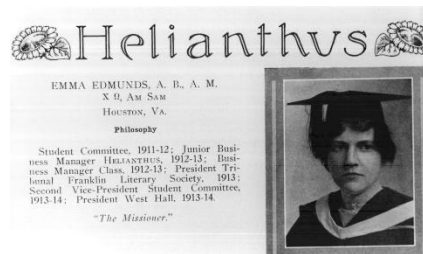
And as an active member of the Young Women's Christian Association, she was their treasurer and chair of the Finance Committee. The position suited her as she was once quoted as saying "If anyone in my family had lost (money), we'd have gasped and fallen dead" (Stirling, 27).



She was chosen to be a member of Am Sam, a secret society, known throughout campus as the "friendship society" and elite in that it allows only sixteen members.



Her senior year would have seemed likely to be her best year.



By now she had become an active part of Randolph-Macon Woman's College. She had been chosen to be editor of *The Tattler*, a position she greatly desired. But her brother was having marriage difficulties and she was needed to live with him and help take care of his children. This was very hard on her; it was very demanding for a full time student, and therefore she was forced to give up her editorship. Another hard knock had come out of a previous triumph. In her junior year she had been elected to be the YWCA representative to the Bryn Mawr YWCA Conference. Usually, the student chosen to go became President of Student Committee. The position of the President of the YWCA was also open for election. These were the two most respected student offices. However, Buck did not receive either position because when asked who she felt would be elected Student President, she openly stated that she felt she would be the one chosen, and this assumption was not viewed favorable by her peers. Another, less sizeable, disappointment came as Emma and Pearl had planned to room together, but were unable to do so since Pearl would be at Edgar's house.



Even among these disappointments, Pearl actively pursued her endeavors, especially her writing. Socially, she expanded as she was now a member of the Theta Chapter of Kappa Delta Sorority, as well as a member of the Pan-Hellenic Association, a board which consisted of representatives from each sorority.

She was first term President of the Franklin Literary Society and wrote "When 'Lof' Comes," another short story. Other writing her senior year consisted of several stories and poems she wrote for *The Tattler* including "The Hours of Worship," "A Chinese Nursery Rhyme," "An Eastern Lullaby," and "Song of the Sun."

Although Buck accomplished much during her four years at R-MWC, her graduation proved to be yet another disappointment. Pearl recaptures that day:

"So I came to the end of college and took my place in the long procession of graduates. I received my diploma, lonely to know that my parents were not in the chapel crowded with other parents, although by then I was used to loneliness of that sort. . . . College was an incident in my life and out of its main stream, an experience which remains incidental. My attempt, successful enough in its own way, to be like other American girls, was not permanent, I fear, and after my graduation I was faced with my two worlds again" (*My Several Worlds*, 96).

Initially, she planned to continue in the American culture to which she had recently become accustomed. She was offered a teaching assistant position in the R-MWC psychology department, and agreed to stay. However, shortly after settling in, she received word that her mother had become fatally ill, so she decided to return to China to teach on a missionary program. But with recent trouble in China, she was unable to gain passage immediately; she taught almost a semester before she heard word that she could make the journey. Emma took over for her and she returned to China in November of 1914 (Stirling, 30).

Although she had learned to be comfortable, adapted, and involved while at R-MWC, it was not the happiest time in her life. She continued to grow among other students, yet remained an outsider. It was not until her later years that she came to appreciate her years at this school. She continued her friendship with Emma Edmunds, and returned on several occasions to the college.



In 1939, she was elected to the Phi Beta Kappa Chapter established at R-MWC in 1917, three years after her graduation. Yet her grades, unlike most would assume, were not straight A's. She claimed that without an interest in sports she lacked a competitive nature and described her study habits:

"I was inclined, too, to waste little time on studies I did not enjoy, such as Latin, mathematics and physics, and stole hours from them to spend in the library reading books I had always wanted to read and had not found before at my hand. I read prodigiously, extravagantly and greedily, in season and out, and certainly lowered my general level of grades . . . (and) . . . my noncompetitive nature prevented me from trying to get higher grades than others. When I did so, it was accidental" (*My Several Worlds*, 95).

In an *Alumnae Bulletin* article written in 1943 on the 50th Anniversary of the college's opening she wrote:

"I hope (the old fiery spirit) still burns in the faculty and in the students. I hope that the lessons are hard--I found them so--and that the teachers still give good grades sparingly and demand real work from everybody with no favors granted" (*Alumnae Bulletin*, 15).

That is not to say, however, that her grades were just average, and they were certainly not below average, as one rumor stating that she had once failed an English class implied. But as it seemed to give inspiration to students, she never dispelled this rumor.

In the Commencement Address, titled "You and Your Miracle," which she delivered at R-MWC in 1964, fifty years after earning her degree, she spoke further words of inspiration.

"The whole purpose of education is first to prepare you with essential knowledge for the next stage in your life and then to persuade, coerce and convince you to use that knowledge in the hope that you will not, because of ignorance, be a destructive force to yourself and to others. Of course you will forget details and facts, but all these years of learning in the areas of human knowledge will compel you nevertheless to remember at least where essential knowledge is to be found, or even re-discovered when you need it" (5).



As a philosophy major, she did not offer advice, but rather provided students with her feelings about education and their duties towards that education. She went on to say

"We have every reason to look forward into the future with hope and excitement. Fear nothing and no one. Work honestly. Be good, be happy. And remember that each of you is unique, your soul your own, irreplaceable, and individual in the miracle of your mortal frame" (7-8).

In 1935 she wrote a plea to the alumnae for their support in establishing a rare book room, saying it "is a valuable thing for a group of alumnae to give to and to support in their alma mater . . . because anything of beauty and of significance is of supreme value to a college" (*Alumnae Bulletin*, April 1935, 16). She continued by saying that "After many years away from college when I look into myself to discover what remains of those years I find it is an atmosphere" (16). And Buck goes on to say, after stated that she had remained friends with only one college mate, Emma,

"Moreover, life gives friends, too, and it is not a peculiar gift of college days. Certainly learning is not the peculiar gift of college, either, for learning . . . increases so that the slight accumulation of those four years is almost valueless. . . . (Yet) at no time in life, I think have you or I been so sensitive to beauty, physical and spiritual, as we were in college. . . . To contribute, then, something for beauty's sake, is to contribute the greatest possible good to the new generations"(16-17).

A rare book room was established shortly after her plea had been published.

Pearl maintained this type of relationship with Randolph-Macon and her college best friend Emma until the end. Although it is true that a college does not make the woman, it is true that it does affect the woman. Buck would probably have achieved many of her accomplishments without R-MWC. She would have been a writer regardless, and would have most likely won the Nobel Prize as pictured here in Stockholm in 1938.

*This is the photograph that she inscribed to Emma, whom she would have probably never met had she not attended R-MWC. But more importantly, without Macon she would not have been the same person. After Buck won the Pulitzer Prize for *The Good Earth*, in her honor the 1932 *Helianthus* was done in a Chinese motif. In it was published a letter she wrote to the students which summarized her approach to life, and provided, as much of her life did and still does, inspiration to the students. She wrote "I shall be in love with life to the very end. Bring zest to it and bring humor and purity of purpose and you will find that pain or pleasure, life is good."*





left to right: Elizabeth Lipscomb, Joy Abbot, Janice Walsh (Pearl Buck's daughter), and Frances Webb at Buck's home, Green Hills Farm, Perkasio, Pennsylvania, in June, 1991 (photography by Dorothy Abbot)

This paper was presented at the Pearl S. Buck Centennial Symposium held at Randolph-Macon Woman's College on March 26-28, 1992. It was prepared by Joy Elizabeth Abbot as an independent study under the supervision of Frances E. Webb.

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