

Memorial Service for Samuel Devons

Robert Belknap, Professor Emeritus of Russian

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Everybody knew Sam symbolically. With his Cambridge gown, fine beard, and erect bearing in deep old age, he was the ideal figure to bear the battle hammer of Columbia on ceremonial occasions. But he symbolized the highest ideals of Columbia in many other ways.

He was a scientist, looking back all his life to the great days of the Cavendish laboratory and bringing that same intellectual drive to Columbia. For Sam, science was not a body of knowledge but an ongoing enterprise. He worried that science students too often plugged in equations to solve problem sets without thinking about the physical world. He liked teaching the history of science more than a physics course because he could make the students design experiments rather than follow directions. He was acutely aware of how crucial scientific understanding was for the decision makers in the country, and of how little scientific understanding there was among them or among the voters they catered to. In his practical way, he founded our University Seminar on Scientific Literacy and guided it for many years, enlisting the wisdom of teachers, journalists, and planners of every sort. That was Sam's approach to things. If he saw a problem, he studied it hard and tried to find a solution.

He was a gentleman. He chaired the Faculty House Advisory Committee for many years, back in the days when faculty still had some say about University decisions. Some now forgotten administrator summoned the chef, who had really been running the Faculty House for 14 years, not terribly well, but faithfully and honestly, to a room where a campus guard was also sitting, told him politely that he was fired, was not to go back to the kitchen, and would be escorted off campus, not to return. His son, who was a Columbia student, lost his tuition exemption. Sam checked whether there was any suspicion of embezzlement or other malfeasance, found that there was not, and simply said, "That's not the way universities treat people." He mobilized his advisory committee, spoke to the highest University authorities, and negotiated a year's leave of absence for the chef, which saw his son through college and enabled him to retire with the modest pension that 15 years of service earns.

He was an intellectual who believed we all should educate each other. He used the Faculty House as a place to gather the educable within Columbia's professoriate. The New Faculty Luncheons he established became a place where lions and animalculae exchanged their expertise and benefited mutually. He tried to found a University Seminar on the future of Columbia to match the lively one on Columbia's history. He talked too much, because he had too much to impart, most of it right and all of it interesting. If somebody asked me what a great

university should be like, I would say, it should be like Sam Devons, demanding, broad, fair, honest, decent, and overflowing with intellection.