

FEATURES

Deborah Hobson reads the scrolls

The globetrotting Master

By KIM ARMITAGE

To paraphrase something someone once said, "You, madame, are a scholar and a lady (make that 'modern lady'), Deborah Hobson."

The first year the Keele Street Campus opened—1967—Deborah Hobson came to the mud fields of York University as a full-time Assistant Professor of Classics and Humanities. She considers herself one of York's "Founding Mothers," and has been a Fellow of Vanier College since 1969. She is now in her third year of a five-year term as Master of Vanier College.

Life before York for Hobson includes: born and educated in New York, N.Y.; B.A. (Latin Major), Barnard College; M.A. (1962) and Ph.D. (Classics), 1965, Yale University; marriage to a member of the Yale faculty; and teaching classics at Smith College, North Hampton, Massachusetts for a year; in 1966 she and her husband moved to Toronto where she snagged a tenure position with the University of Toronto and taught classics part-time at Trinity College, and the next year became part-time instructor in Classics in York. The following year she moved to full-time faculty. By 1971 she had a child, and a year and a half later a divorce.

Since 1971, Hobson has been Associate Professor of Classics and Humanities, becoming a full professor this year. "My discipline within the classics is called papyrology," she explains, "which is the decipherment of documents from Greco-Roman Egypt that are written in Greek on papyrus. It's a weird branch of classics and there are, in the world, maybe 100 people doing this. It's an international discipline and puts one into a world-wide network of scholars. Basically I'm a social historian but instead of working from books I work from original manuscripts. And there are tons and tons of papyri in various locations still undeciphered. It's a field in which there's so much more material than people trained to work on it. It's exciting. Because it's such a kooky kind of discipline I've gotten to go to all sorts of exotic places. A couple of years ago I was working with a group in Cairo on some unpublished documents. We were in a workroom where the gold coffin of King Tut was being repaired and there we were, sort of shoving it aside so we could lay out our papyri. That sort of thing puts everything in a different perspective."

In the summer of 1975 Hobson was awarded a Canada Council grant to do papyrological research in Vienna, and she continues to attend the international papyrological congresses held every three years, with the next one in Athens in 1986. In 1978-79 she spent a year at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton University, and in 1984 she was speaker at a congress in Dublin, Ireland.

"I've been fortunate," she smiles. "My international circuit has expanded in recent years. One of the things that I've discovered is that being an active scholar has the most incredible number of side benefits in terms of getting to know people and places all over the world. There's a real sense of life and action."

Hobson talks about her administrative job as Master of Vanier College the same way she talks about everything else—some serious, often rapid-fire, frequently irreverent, always intense.

"My main mandate is to look out for the welfare of Vanier College students," says Hobson.

"Although, as Master, I am the person who is the last source of authority for everything in Vanier College, in actual fact, Vanier and its Masters have always operated in a very open and democratic way so the authority of the Master has never been an issue. Ultimately I am responsible for what goes on in the College Residence—programs, activities and so forth—though the Residence Tutor is in charge on a daily basis. My responsibilities do not extend to faculty members.

"I have a certain budget and a lot of flexibility in its use in terms of being able to decide what things

are going to happen," she continues. "Of course we always complain that we never have enough money, which is true. The colleges have received very poor treatment at the hands of the University over the years. Under our new Provost, Tom Meininger, that situation is reversing. He has given us tremendous support.

"One of the things I did last November that had never been done before, and we'll repeat it this fall, was to use part of our program budget to have a reception for outstanding students of the college," says Hobson. "The idea that anyone who wants to go to university is entitled to is one that I certainly subscribe to, but it doesn't mean that we don't want our students to excel academically. This is an academic institution. I really think it's important that students who are outstanding academically be honored, and that they should feel proud of, and enjoy, their accomplishments."

redress this situation. Universities have laid down and let governments just steam-roller them. Without the preservation of those traditional values that a university embodies, the society is dead."

Hobson believes that York is unique among universities in a very positive sense. It has an atmosphere of informality and a lack of pretense that is rare among universities. It is not hide-bound or stuffy but committed to experimentation.

"York's faculty is, I think, very under-appreciated in the world at large. Members vary in their scholarly credentials and whatever, but as human beings and committed teachers they're fabulous. I think a person coming to York could get an exciting kind of teaching not likely to be found at a place such as University of Toronto."

Hobson is not a stereotypical example of a traditional, classicist female scholar. She is a modern role model for women students coming out of universi-



Vanier College's Deborah Hobson during a non-papyrological moment, but with hard-hat nearby.

On the subject of the role of universities at present and in the future Hobson has deeply held, passionate views which she presents with clarity and challenge. "As a classicist I'm well aware that students see the university as a job training place. A student will say to me, 'I can't take Latin because what will it lead to?' Well, my father was a classics major and he went into the insurance business. Unless a student pursues his or her undergraduate major on a graduate level, with the idea of teaching that discipline or moving into that specific profession, there is often little connection with the real life job he or she ends up with. Undergraduate training should not be considered job training. It's life training. It's training the mind to fully exercise its rational capacities. In that context I feel it's tremendously important to help students realize the incredible variety of things to do in this world."

One of the things which has concerned Hobson a great deal during the eighteen years she's been in Canada is the absence of any strong leadership from the university presidents.

"For example, every time President Giamatti of Yale University speaks publicly he makes an absolutely brilliant, articulate defense of traditional, humanistic education. There has not been a single significant statement defending the traditional values of an education by any university official in Canada that I know of. That is appalling. I hope that York's new president, Harry Arthurs, will want to

ties today. "Goddamit," she exclaims, "women have hidden their lights under a bushel for too long. I'm struck by the fact that the people I meet again and again, who have the dazzle, the energy—are women. I think it's a really good time to be a woman in our society, and I think they should really go for it."

For anyone who lives a philosophy of life so completely as Hobson does, a request to put it into words brings an unusually long and reflective pause. "I'm now in my mid-40s, an age where suddenly all the areas of my life where I've made investments of time and energy are coming to fruition. It's not because I parachuted from nowhere and suddenly here I am. It's the last 20 years I've been sloggling along, putting in my time in the ranks. I didn't have any grand plan in pursuing the things I did. I did them because—there I was. It keeps your options open in a way that multiplies as you get older. I usually say what comes into my head and sometimes get myself in trouble for it. But overall I think that's been more for the better than for the worse.

"I believe in the possibility of human growth. Passionately. My daughter said to me—and this sort of sums up how I feel—'You're so lucky 'cause you're grown-up, and you know what you are when you're grown up. I don't know what I'm going to be when I'm grown up.' I said, 'Now, wait a second. I'll admit that, objectively, I'm a grown-up and I'm doing what I'm doing. But inside myself I feel like an 11-year-old and the world is my oyster.'"