Interview with Barrie Tait Collins

Barnard class of 1949

Location: Phone Interview

Time Length of Interview: 49:30

Conducted by Elizabeth Moye

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Barrie Collins is a Barnard alumna, class of 1949. Currently, she lives near New Haven, Connecticut. She is retired after having been a writer and an editor in New York City and a reporter in Connecticut for many years. She describes herself as having been a citizen activist all her life. For the purpose of this interview, Collins provides the perspective of a Barnard alumna during the period of the Barnard-Columbia merger discussion—which she describes as a difficult and uncertain time for the College.

E. Moye:

I’m creating an oral history of the time period in which the discussion was being held of the possibility that Barnard and Columbia might merge. And through the research that I have done, I have really found that there was, first of all, extreme criticism of this and basically—

B. Collins:

On whose part did you find?

E. Moye:

Well I would say on the part of the Barnard faculty, from the Barnard students, and the Barnard administration as well. I also found that Columbia seemed to be somewhat coercive in its nature.

B. Collins:

Oh yes. Yes.

E. Moye: Okay, so I’m really interested in your perspective on that, but I would like to just start by asking you, Barrie—If I can call you Barrie—

B. Collins:

Please.

E. Moye:

About your decision to come to Barnard, as well as your experience here, because I think that’s also really important for your presence as an alumna, which is so strong.

B. Collins:

Well, first of all, I grew up in—actually I was born in—New York City, and I lived there in the winter until I was 10 years old. I had three younger brothers. And we always had a summer cottage out in northern New Jersey, just about 20 minutes from the George Washington Bridge really. And it was in real, real country. It was back of the Palisades of the Hudson, which my family had a long association with saving from being blasted away in the past—in early years of the 1900s. And so, the idea of being nearby at a great university, or at a women’s college I should say, had appeal. But my family had associations with Columbia. My mother had gone to Teacher’s College for one year—not as a teacher, but for various other things—and then gone into full time art. Her family was in art for many, many years. Two of my mother’s brothers and one of her cousins, as well as my father’s brother were graduates of Columbia. And so I had the New York City connection because I had lived in New York City and went back even after I no longer lived there. I went back for various things. And so that was sort of like a home base. And, as I say, I had family members who had gone to Columbia, and were graduates of, and Columbia is world famous, and Barnard was certainly well known. And going to a women’s college appealed to me; it was not a major reason for selecting it; mainly it was because it was a terrific college in a great university, and nearby. I’m not sure whether New York City, per say, was the biggest deal, because I’m not terribly much of a city person in some ways, but the combination—it was sort of inevitable—I never really considered any place else, and I don’t remember whether I applied to anything else to get in. I’m not sure what it would have been. I certainly have no memory of it. I really think I just applied to Barnard, assuming that I would get in. Partly, perhaps, because of family connections, but I was a good student. I went to one of the two or three top high schools in New Jersey. We had college-level type of teachers, and I took what was called the college preparatory courses. I had four years of Latin, if you can imagine anybody taking four years of Latin; it wasn’t exactly common in those days, but anyone who wanted to go to college needed probably at least two years. And, so, for some reason or other, I ended up taking four, and you had to have a second language of course, or another language. I had a lot of history—four years of history—which was more than I had to have, and of course, four years of English. So those were just sort of the things I wanted, and Barnard had them. And, as I say, I had all of these different connections that made Barnard—it was just inevitable—I don’t know what I would have done if I hadn’t been accepted [laughs]. It’s so funny. It wasn’t as hard to get into Barnard in those days, but I think it was always an elite college. When I think back on it, it certainly had the prestige.

E. Moye:

And you enjoyed your time at Barnard?

B. Collins:

Yes I did. No, very much so. I’m somewhat of an intellectual person, not a deep one, but I certainly have deep interest in the intellectual world, and I think the intimacy of the college had a lot to do with it. In those days, it was much smaller. And I lived on campus for four years. I thought I wouldn’t have been allowed to stay because New Jersey was not that far away [laughs], but it was a good—at least an hour, hour and a half. But I’m really glad I didn’t have to commute because it’s a hugely different experience, and probably even now it’s a different experience. Because back then there were only 1200 students in the entire college; 200 of them lived on campus—that was all the room that there was—Brooks and Hewitt were the only dorms in those days. And we had a great deal more green on campus, which I deeply regret that Barnard had to give some of it up in recent years—I think that was a big mistake—but anyway—still more green, I guess, in comparison to what’s around them. But there was an intimacy to the college that was very nice, and my best friends were all dorm students. Even in later life I still keep in touch with—a couple of them died of course, I am 87, so you do lose friends by then—but really my best friend is still alive and living in the Washington D.C. area, and we talk back and forth from time to time. Her mother, by the way, was head of the Alumnae Association, after we were students I think, but she had an intense family tie, shall we say, to the university. But I think the influence of Barnard never left me throughout my life. I’ve always said Barnard went along with me wherever I was, because I majored in English Literature, and I minored in History, as you know; I would have majored in History, but I did not want to take economic courses—they seemed terribly dry—it was the excitement of history. Anyway, I got the best of both worlds, because I could take what I wanted in the English literature field, and I could take what I wanted in the history field. And I had fabulous, fabulous professors. In fact, all of my experiences with the Barnard faculty were very, very positive. They were outstanding scholars. But in most cases they were outstanding human beings too. I still remember one year I took a course in government, which I really had not intended to take, but it was sort of in the history line, because I heard a lot about it. It was a good course. It was given by a woman called Mrs. Fairbanks, who was maybe in her forties—I practically raised off my seat after I been to a couple of those classes—she was *unbelievably* dynamic, and I have never forgotten the introduction to government. It gave me a much better basis for later life—what makes what tick and how you go about influencing things. And it’s been very, very useful to me throughout my life.

E. Moye:

Sure. Well that’s great. And I think the faculty is definitely one of the reasons that Barnard wanted to remain autonomous, because there was such an important relationship between students and faculty throughout its history. I’m also wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your understanding of Barnard’s relationship to Columbia during your time here?

B. Collins:

Well, I don’t think Columbia was, as far as I know, making any overt plans to try to take Barnard over. But we always had the feeling that we were a little different than the rest of Columbia—not just Columbia College, but Columbia generally—that we sort of had our own little bailiwick over where we were. I don’t remember there being any antagonism. I don’t think it had really reached that point. And I don’t think Columbia was making any overt tries the way they did later, which is probably the reason why. I think if they had we would have felt very possessive. I know we felt special within the University. I don’t remember thinking much about Columbia College—I mean, even though presumably they were our brothers across the way. I don’t remember thinking that they were as special to Columbia within the Columbia circle as we were; we really felt as if we were, not in the superior sense, I guess you could say special. [Laughs] And we had a good thing going where we were, and we were very happy with it. But I don’t remember any sense of threat from Columbia whatsoever. We had perfect freedom to go back and forth, although nothing like the class interchange now. There were a few Columbia students, I think, who were on our campus. I do not remember them, but I know there probably were a few, and there were some Barnard students who went to Columbia courses. But it had to be a case where there was no other alternative, and they needed it perhaps for a major or something.

E. Moye:

Oh, I see. I didn’t realize that.

B. Collins:

Yeah. There was no—nothing like what it has become in more recent years. So that also made us feel a little more—I won’t say exclusive—but sort of kept us within our little world. It was a little world; even though the city was out there, there was always a fence on the other side. [Laughs] More in the case of Claremont, we were stories above the street. So, it was—I won’t say it was like a monastery—but there probably [laughs] were a few general comparisons.

E. Moye:

Okay. So because you had graduated and were no longer on campus when the discussion of the merger took place, I’m curious to know when you actually began hearing about the possibility of merging.

B. Collins:

Well, it probably came through the Alumnae Magazine. I went back to my first reunion, which might have been—I don’t know, I can’t remember—the tenth or the twenty-fifth. I didn’t go again until the fiftieth; it is the only one that I clearly remember going and spending two days at. It probably was through the magazine. I don’t know that it was through my friends—my two best friends—one lived in Westchester, and she got married and settled down immediately; my other friend went on to graduate school elsewhere (she’s the one in Washington now). And I don’t think she probably was any where near as aware, if at all, in the earlier stages. So, I think it must have come through the Alumnae Magazine. There were rumbles along this line. It might have come in some class letters, you know, from class presidents to people in our class. I really can’t put a pinpoint on it, but, as I say, it was really past my era, but certainly at some point, I became very much aware of it. And there was an immediate—I forget, I think I saw it in the Alumnae Magazine—sort of like an immediate reaction to it. I sort of felt like: “How dare they?” [Laughs] We were a little bit afraid because they were so big, so famous, so aged—in terms of years—that it seemed like we would probably lose. I mean this was a real threat. And I know—it had to be in the Alumnae Magazine—I don’t know if you have access to any of those ones of the time—I don’t even know in what form—it might have been in some—I assume they had a letters column. I guess the first threat, maybe the first real threat, came under Ellen Futter. And I never knew her personally, but I certainly had heard a great deal about her at the time she was president, because I have copies of addresses she made—I have them right in from of me now—in 1981, 1986, 1992. She was inaugurated at Riverside Church on November 22, 1981, and then she gave the Barnard Commencement address in ’86, and a reunion address in 1992, and they sent copies of them, apparently, to the alumnae—because otherwise I wouldn’t have had them. I’m sure I read them at the time. She was a go-getter, in the finest sense of the word. As I mentioned in one of my emails to you, just by chance, she married a man who grew up in Bethany, which is a very small town—and her mother-in-law was very well known in town. But, anyway, the threat was, I would say, was visceral—[laughs] it wasn’t intellectual—it was definitely visceral. We were separate. We were glad to be within the confines of a world-famous university, but we had our own identity—we had developed our own identity very quickly. I lay that to Dean Gildersleeve. And, I think it was just the nerve of them. How dare they follow through on this?! Or try to follow through on it. And I guess it was fairly dicey, for a year or two. But, thankfully, Ellen Futter was a lawyer herself; I think that made a huge difference. She never had to call on lawyers and sort of hire them to do the fight. I don’t think it would have been the same. I know she did not go to Barnard. I’m not sure where she went—

E. Moye:  
She did go to Barnard.

B. Collins:

Oh, she did go? I really didn’t realize that. Oh, well that would give her an added—okay—well I’m glad you told me that because in retrospect I did not remember that. And that may have been how they sort of found her to be president, because she was active after she graduated.

E. Moye:

Yeah, she was very active. She was on the Board of Trustees and became President in 1980.

B. Collins:

I think she probably was the only president who could have done what she did. Because Gildersleeve just about played herself out fighting Columbia to get—to even get—Barnard women properly recognized within the University family. But the main thing she did was—I didn’t realize that I read about it this past year; in fact I probably knew, but I’d forgotten it—that she had to fight so hard to get women accepted into the graduate—Barnard graduates—into the graduate schools at Columbia. I didn’t realize that they were all men until that point, and sort of like one school after another—she almost had to fight it school by school; it wasn’t just sort of en masse. And when I read it, as I say, within the past year or so, that Barnard women went to the head of each class they were in practically right away [laughs], which proved her point. But it was a real fight to get Columbia’s own women at Barnard accepted into Columbia’s own graduate schools.

E. Moye:

And you’re saying that Virginia Gildersleeve did this?

B. Collins:

Yes, oh yes. And this is documented. There are a number of publications on Gildersleeve. There’s a fine—I don’t have the book in front of me, but anyway—but a number of the Barnard Alumnae Magazines have had stories on it. There was one in summer 1995: “Who was Virginia Gildersleeve? There’s More to this Collegiate Pioneer Than First Meets the Eye.” That’s not the only issue, there was another one in—let’s see if I can find it; I excerpted the article without noting what issue it—I have a picture of her here: “The best possible woman,” and it says by “Nicholas Murray Butler.” I guess that was in 1947; he must have written a sort of commendation of her. I think, yes 1947, Report of the Dean of Barnard College for the academic year. They had it in the Alumnae Magazine, and it’s quite an extensive article on her. Those two issues, are the ones that I’ve saved, so they obviously were the best ones for that sort of thing.

E. Moye:

Oh, okay. Well I’ll have to take a look at those.

B. Collins:

Yeah, and Ellen Futter was on the cover of the one in summer 1992. “A Talk with the President” is the main article. It goes on for at least four pages—no more than that; it goes on for about eight pages, 10 pages. It’s worth well looking into those things because many times you’ll find just the phrase you’re looking for [laughs]. She can’t be hard to find, she’s very well known in New York social circles because the president, or the director—I don’t know what it’s called at the American Museum of Natural History—seems to get in on social events.

E. Moye:

Yes, I’m working on contacting her now.

B. Collins:

Yeah, I can’t believe that she wouldn’t be more than happy to give you some one-on-one personal type of reaction. But, obviously it hit her very—right where—she was—she got really mad. But being a lawyer she knew the right way to go about it in a systematic fashion, so that was her great contribution to save us an independent—an independent within a great university.

E. Moye:

And, can you tell me a little bit—I mean, I know from your perspective that this was: “How dare they? How could Columbia do this?” Did you feel that that was the same perspective that your peers had? Did you discuss this with your—

B. Collins:

Well, once you’re out of college, it’s pretty hard to discuss it with other graduates unless they happen to be your good friends. I’m sure I did, and I’m not sure that my friends were as—I’m sure they agreed with me 100%—but whether they expressed it in a sense that mattered, I don’t think so. When I say this, I’m only talking about a few friends; I’m not talking about my class as a whole. But members who are still active in the Alumnae Association are dedicated people—I will say that. They want to keep the spirit of Barnard alive and well. And I worked with the gal that did our reunion just this past year for our 65th; she lives on Long Island, and I guess she wrote all the alumnae of the class, so she wanted to have people send in information about who they were and so forth—and I worked with her a lot on the cover. She wanted some kind of an expression that would explain how we were today, those of us who survived. And she wanted to say that the class was “strolling along.” I said: “that’s much too tame for me!” [Laughs] I still do a lot of real walking—mild hiking—and so she agreed with me, but I finally came along with the right word: striding. So it’s not strolling; it’s striding along. Depending on which you are, they’re both included, but it’s on the cover of the Alumnae booklet: “strolling and striding along 2014,” which we both agreed was great because it covers those who are totally inactive or physically incapacitated, as well as those who are still physically fit. [Laughs] It took us weeks of back-and-forth getting this particular euphemism and phraseology and everything all worked out. It was fun because it brought back a lot of Barnard’s memories. There were people in the class who were much more active than I was at that stage—in being officers of the class and that sort of thing. I was not really into that; it didn’t interest me particularly. I was on the school newspaper, though, because I did want to write somehow or other. And I don’t mean fiction—I mean non-fiction—I was never interested in anything but non-fiction writing. So, that’s what I ended up doing actually.

E. Moye:

Oh! That’s great. And, in an email to me you mentioned your concern with Columbia’s “power grab.” And I’m quoting your words here. And you’ve talked a little bit about this also, but I’d love if you could tell me a little bit more about what you mean exactly by “power grab.”

B. Collins:

Well, taking Barnard over. [Laughs] If you control the finances, you control everything. And they would control who gets what, who gets promoted, who doesn’t. No, it just, the idea that—and as far as I know there have only been men presidents of Columbia—the idea of men controlling, through the purse, a woman’s college is a pretty big deal, because they simply do not have the same objectives in mind. They *can*; I have some very liberated men in my own family, so I know that men can be very different, but the idea that some man sitting on the Columbia campus could control what happens on our campus just—and [laughs] I wasn’t really in a position to do anything about it, but I’m sure I must have written somebody or said something. I think there was even perhaps a survey that may have been sent around. I certainly would have participated in anything like that. It was just so long ago that I just do not remember. But I remember being incensed about it and doing whatever I could at the time, which probably was very little because I was working in New York City, but I would not have hesitated to express my opinion if given half a chance. So, I don’t feel like I was an effective element, but there certainly was a groundswell from alumnae in general, and I certainly was part of that and whatever that actual expression took I would have been part of—whether it was a petition, or a letter from our class president, or letters from the alumnae—it was a phase and certainly I’ve gone on to other things since then, like marriage and children, but it was definitely a part of my memory of Barnard that a while after I left that things got a little tense, with no clear victory in mind. In fact, I’m not quite—well, of course, the only way Ellen was able to do it was to let them agree to have their own women join their Columbia College class, which in retrospect doesn’t seem quite as forbidding as it did at the time. At the time it seemed a little threatening, I think, because we weren’t quite sure where women would want to go. And, obviously, women do go there. I don’t know what the percentage is, but I know one thing: it did not hurt Barnard’s enrollment. And I think that’s due to the fact that Barnard has an independent name even though it’s part of a great university. But Radcliffe, as you well know, just went under. I mean it was just as big a name as Barnard then, and it’s a non-entity—a part of history—and Barnard is sailing along. The other women’s colleges were all totally independent, like Vassar and Smith, stuck out in the middle of nowhere, by themselves, and that’s fine, but we were still part of, I would say, one of the two or three greatest universities in the world. And that’s a thrill in itself. And yet we were a distinct, enviable unit within it and had been for quite a long time. So, I was always very proud I went to Barnard, and it was a huge help to me throughout life, in terms of the courses I took there, the professors I knew and liked—I’m sure this is still true now, but we had some quirky ones. I do remember the Spanish department being absolutely the most ferocious department you could possibly have taken any courses in. I had come in with a little weak background in Spanish, although I enjoyed it, but I found after two years under the severity of the Spanish department [laughs], which was totally run by Castilians from Spain originally, not South America, I gave it up reluctantly and went into French for a couple of years. But, I did like languages, but history and English literature were just—that was it. We had such wonderful, wonderful professors. But I did some other things. I remember enjoying economic geography because I’m interested—I always collected stamps when I was—throughout my life I collected stamps—I was just interested in geography. They used to teach it in schools too, and I’m sure when I grew up it was part of the curriculum—many courses, many years. And I had a woman called Florrie Holzwasser; she joined Barnard in 1917, and she didn’t retire until 1955, and she was just a wonderful character [laughs]. I remember enjoying it; in fact, I took another course with her. It was sort of an unknown department, not many people majored in Economic Geography, although it’s certainly important. But I enjoyed those courses immensely. And she was not one of the big names on campus, but everybody knew her—knew of her—and so, we had a lot of unusual people like that. I also took the first—I think I mentioned to you—the first American Studies course. It may have been the first in any college and/or university—I’m not sure. But it was absolutely original to Barnard. It was called American Studies, but it kind of crossed, as you can imagine, a whole lot of disciplines—literature, history, art—and it was the integration of things that was so amazing in that course. It’s really the way it should be studied, because otherwise it’s compartmentalized into history, geography, literature, science, and so forth. But it was all of one piece, and it was taught by a very unusual man, John Kouvenhoven, who was a hugely interesting person himself—very warm. I just remember enjoying it. I wish there had been more. I would have taken—I don’t know what year I took it, I probably took it senior year. But Barnard offered that course, and I don’t know how many other universities would have. It was kind of a new way of looking at things—cutting across disciplines. And my husband was an ecologist, and it was fascinating because ecology does the same things. It doesn’t say: “chemistry over here, physics over here.” It cuts across the whole thing and puts it into a meaningful whole. They mean nothing separately—they’re all integrated—they should be integrated. And only ecology integrates the sciences. And for a long time, even after I got married, I had to explain what an ecologist—I still have to explain what an ecologist is. People don’t understand it’s a cross-discipline way of looking at things. And that’s what American Studies was. In a way it made sense of things that you could not really make sense of otherwise. So, I mean this was just one of those—I could almost call it revolutionary—courses that Barnard offered, and I was so glad that I took it, because there was nothing you could really compare it to. I remember being constantly fascinated.

E. Moye:

Something you mentioned, really, just stuck out to me, which is—it was a little bit earlier—but you said that having a man sitting at Columbia deciding the fate of an all women’s college, and holding the purse strings—that really stuck out to me because I’m wondering what your perception is, or how much you value the all-women’s education—if that is still a defining feature of Barnard for you, or if you view Barnard just as another liberal arts school?

B. Collins:

No, no, no, no, it is a defining feature. And though I don’t know—there probably are some other examples of it—but at the top of my mind I can’t think of any, certainly not at the academic level that Barnard’s at. No, it just—we all know—we women know that men do not fully understand the life of women. Women seem much more interesting to me, and lead more diversified lives than men do. And you ask any man in history who the biggest influence in his life was, nine out of ten times he’s going to say his mother. And I wonder why? Because she’s got that human, loving, all-forgiving—usually—aspect to her. My children can do no wrong—except when they do, I will tell them [laughs]. Anybody who gets to the upper levels of academe in terms of administration can be a little bit of a dry person, and that doesn’t help them—the idea of the male controlling the female. No, the purse strings were the ultimate factor, and that was the great victory—to keep our purse strings to ourselves—to Barnard.

E. Moye:

And why was that the ultimate victory?

B. Collins:

Well, money controls everything in the world, and if you hold the purse strings you can advance or control whatever the institution or person is. So that was the key, because then we could determine what faculty we hired, what we paid them—everything that comes from that—whether you expand the campus a little bit, and what criteria you use for entry of students. It’s a huge, huge factor. I happen to come from a family where the men were extremely pro-women, or understanding of women, and that I’m sure made a difference in my thinking. I was not used to men dominating everything, or, what should I say—not dominating—but making all the decisions, or not understanding women’s role. I mean, my grandfather was a big name in the art world, around 1900—a little before that—and it was not that he did so much art himself, but he was called an architect-artist, and headed what is now the oldest stained-glass studio in the United States. It was a family one. But he was in everything—he was a wonderful speaker, and he had a very comprehensive view of things. But, anyway, my grandmother was a well-known painter in her lifetime, and he knew what women could do, and he did everything he could to help her in her career, which was not usual. She had four children—of course she had some help in the house; everybody did in those days practically—but he went out of his way—in fact he was asked to be a founder of the National Arts Club, which is still going in New York City, and he said: “Yes, I would love to join you. Of course you’re inviting women too?” They said: “Well we haven’t quite figured that out.” And he said: “Well, then you can count me out.” Well, they wanted him very badly, and they counted women in. That was the first arts club of men and women, at least in this country, and maybe abroad for all I know. They were on equal footing with the men, so that made a difference. And my father was the same way, even though he went into business—which he didn’t really like that much,;he should have been a college professor in some ways—but he changed his career around for my mother who was a professional stained-glass designer and very well-known. And he did not want to take her away from her family studios, which was then in New Jersey, and he had opportunities to move to San Francisco or Atlanta, Georgia, and he turned them all down, which truncated his career, but he was that in love with my mother [laughs]. And that’s not the usual pattern—that a male would turn them down—even though he loved his wife. And he didn’t want to take his four children to different schools either. So, anyway, so I have several very good examples in my family of men who were way ahead of their time. And the arts world tends to be that way—I think more—there’s much more recognition of women’s achievements in that world for some reason or other. But, it’s coming; it’s coming gradually. We’re going to have a woman president; it’s just a matter of time. [Laughs] No matter how you feel about Hillary, I don’t think she’s really got much competition.

E. Moye:

I hope not!

B. Collins:

Yeah, I hope not! And certainly Elizabeth Warren is headed for great things in the future. She’s a woman who tells you what things are. Hillary doesn’t always do that; her one big blot is that she voted for that Iraqi war, because there were plenty of Democrats who did not, and that’s going to be hard for her to live down, but she’s done lots of other wonderful things. And she’s certainly competent—My God—she’s competent to be president. And it’s time for a woman. They always said: “A black man will be president before a woman is.” And it’s proven—for a strange reason—it does turn out to be true. Anyway, that’s neither here nor there. As you can see I have opinions on lots of things.

E. Moye:  
Well, I appreciate all of them!

B. Collins:

Well, I’ve been a citizen activist all my life, one way or another. Particularly in the field of conservation, which is what drew me to my husband because we were in the same bailiwick—he was a professional, and I was a citizen—but that’s what makes the world go round. You don’t respect Mother Nature, you’ll pay in the end. Big business has yet to learn that. Unfortunately, when they make an error, they’re not the ones that suffer; it’s the human race that suffers—whether you’re saying DDT or drilling for oil in the arctic—it’s all—Mother Nature has the last word.

E. Moye:

Do you think Barnard inspired your lifelong activism?

B. Collins:

Oh, yes. I think it gave me a lot of confidence. There’s no question—it gave me confidence because it gave me knowledge. And there was also an atmosphere that pervaded the college, that women—not that—I had very strong models in my own family; I guess I just pointed it out in both my mother and my grandmother, who had careers all their lives—but Barnard just sort of endorsed that in a big way: women of achievement. Head of the college: that was a huge factor—all the other women’s colleges had men presidents right up—well past the time that I was at Barnard. In fact, Mattfeld lived in Bethany for a few years, just by strange coincidence; I didn’t know her. But I think the fact that Barnard has always had a woman president says everything, because, you know, other women’s colleges had male presidents until the 60s, 70s, and maybe some later than that. A man could still be president of Barnard, but I just don’t think it fits with the image, that’s all. We have such strong women now, who have done so many wonderful things. Barnard’s had a great variety. There have been a couple of weak ones that didn’t last long. But Judith Shapiro: she was a lively one, and at one of my reunions—she spoke, of course, because she was president—she just suddenly burst out in the most incredible voice, singing some famous or popular song from the time, from a musical. I mean she could have been on the stage she was so talented. [Laughs] We were all just cheering wildly because it was a little out of character, but it was such a talented performance [laughs]—unwarranted. I don’t know that she did it spontaneously or had planned to do it—I think she probably planned to do it—but it was very exciting. It was a whole other phase of her life that we didn’t know anything about. At Barnard anything was possible. But it was just the fact that everybody had strong interests. We weren’t there to just party. In fact, sororities, apparently they had them at Barnard at one point in the early part of the 1900s perhaps, but they were banned—literally banned—long before I got there. And I think that says quite a bit right there. You didn’t gather just for that kind of reason; you gathered on other bases: interests, abilities, this sort of thing.

E. Moye:

How do you think Barnard’s mission would have been lost, or changed, if we had been subsumed by Columbia?

B. Collins:

Well, we would have been another college of the University that happened to be open to women. I mean you never hear about the women at Columbia College. I’m sure some of them are outstanding students, I don’t doubt it, but you’re just subsumed, that’s all. You’re just part of the University; you simply are not—I mean, I’m just north of New Haven, that’s the biggest city near me, I’m 20 minutes away from Yale University, and the colleges just are lost in—even if they’ve had some famous alumni—they’re just sort of lost in Yale. I mean the big name is Yale; it’s not the name of their college. Of course it’s not quite the same thing—well, there’s a similarity. But, I think we would have—particularly if we had a number of distinguished graduates, as we have. Although we have tended to be more in the arts I think, perhaps, more than any other particular line of achievement. But, no, we would not be the college that we are. We had been independent from the beginning—as you could be at the time. But even though I wasn’t there when this whole threat became a reality, I was at the transition point, because we were the first—’49, 1949 was the first—post-war class—first post-WWII class. Because Germany had surrendered in, I think it was April ‘45, Japan surrendered in August, and we went in in September. And the war was over. It had lasted a long time; my entire high school years were spent in the WWII era, which involved rationing—severe rationing, not the kind the British had, but pretty severe for us—plus the threat of German submarines sinking ships off our east coast, which was very real. In fact, there was always the threat that they could even send an airplane or two over to bomb. I know it sounds crazy, but it was reality. But, as I say, one month after WWII—which was a great war, in terms of size—ended, we went into Barnard. And, of course, there was still a lot of austerity in terms of what was available, just in terms of things, not things of monetary value, but in terms of facilities, the college had probably pretty much stood still for four years while the war was being fought. You really couldn’t get things, you couldn’t—you were just sort of hoping that the war would end at some point. And also, because I was under Gildersleeve for two years and McIntosh for the second two years—they were very different people. Gildersleeve was a little, I won’t say standoffish, but a little more forbidding because she was so distinguished, but she was gracious to people. She lived on campus—I think she lived on campus anyway—because I lived on campus and I was able to see her. A lot of people who were commuters completely missed all this sort of stuff. And McIntosh, again I don’t know whether she actually lived on campus—I don’t remember—but when she came she was the total opposite. Of course, she had four children and she was married, but, because she was married to a pediatrician who was wealthy, she could pretty much do with her life what she wanted, and she did. She was a wonderful person. She lived to be over 100, as you know. The *New York Times* had a big article on her when she was—I think—100, as I recall. I guess she still lived in the city area. But, she was very warm and very outgoing, but I don’t think she was distinguished in the sense that Gildersleeve was. And, I mean it was a huge contrast, which is great because, you know, here’s the life of intellect that was Gildersleeve, and here’s the life of a married woman who can still achieve on her own as president of a college. So it was a perfect spanning of all the possibilities that a woman could live. And we were literally in that era. There were only two classes that overlapped on both of them: mine and the one that came after us. And, at the same time, Columbia was going through the same process; when we got there, the first two years when Gildersleeve was our Dean—I don’t know if she ever was given the term “President,” but she should have been—Nicholas Murray Butler, who was a very famous—I guess—distinguished scholar, although I don’t really remember, was President of Columbia and had been for a long time, and he retired in the same transition period between Gildersleeve and McIntosh, and Dwight Eisenhower, who was the great hero of WWII, came in as president. And he was very, very famous. He had commanded hundreds of thousands of troops, from many nations. You can imagine just the kind of mind you have to have to be able to control troops from many different countries. He obviously had an amazing ability militarily. He was an interesting person. I remember meeting him once on campus; he was coming towards me and I thought: “Oh! General Eisenhower! What do I say?” [Laughs] I think I said: “Good morning” or “Hello,” and he said the same to me with a smile, and we passed on [laughs] in opposite directions—my sole contact; it was very funny. But he was president for the next two years that I was at Barnard. So it was a huge transition between presidents at both University and College, and eras—it was really a change in eras too—and at a subliminal level, I was aware of this; I’ve harked back on it many times since because it was a bigger transition than even I realized at the time. It certainly marked a more modern—and it probably boosted Barnard’s energy, seeing how they had been sort of pent up during those war years and began to flex their muscles a little bit, and then Columbia came along some years later or so and began to really, not just make noise, but do something about it. Fortunately, Ellen Futter was president. That’s all I can say—bless her. I’m sure she’s got some interesting comments to make. She might not feel free to make some, but I hope she does.

E. Moye:

Yeah! I just have one more question for you, and thank you so much, because this has been so great and informative for me, but I would like to just ask you as a final question what did you think would come of Barnard’s decision to remain an autonomous institution? You mentioned to me in an email that you were worried that “little Barnard” might not be able to “withstand the pressure,” and I would love for—

B. Collins:

That was at the time—I don’t have that feeling anymore. I mean, we now have a full legal agreement. I’m not worried about Barnard’s existence at all—

E. Moye:

No, at the time of the merger, did you worry that—at the time of the merger—

B. Collins:

Well, you know, I didn’t know all the details of the agreement. We did know that Columbia had gotten the ability to admit women to Columbia College. I think we worried that women would tend to go there because they would have the benefit of a first-class education, and not to dissociate Barnard College from that—of course I always say I am a graduate of Barnard and Columbia, or I just say I’m a graduate of Columbia, which is true too—at least, I was a little concerned that maybe more women would go there than go to Barnard. I wasn’t worried about Barnard’s existing. But it didn’t turn out to be that way because any woman—I shouldn’t contend the classes of Columbia because I really don’t know about the women who have gone there—that might be an interesting study—but I thought we had all the benefits of both worlds. We were graduates of a great university, and we were also graduates of, not just a first-class women’s college—college period—that had its own existence, shall we say, outside of the university, and yet we were within it in terms of resources, some exchanging professors—even those days I think there was a little bit of professors teaching across the line, more likely Barnard at Columbia than the other way around—but not very much. I think if you were pretty much a Barnard professor you pretty much taught on the Barnard campus. We had as many men as we did women. I mean obviously they thought it was a privilege to teach at Barnard, which it was, because you had a super group of students to work with. There probably were people who dropped out of Barnard. I don’t remember knowing any. I mean there always are a few people. But I think the people who went there went there for a reason, and they probably enjoyed it—although at varying degrees—some people took a very active part in campus life, in terms of groups and things that they led or joined. I was on the newspaper, but other than that I was pretty much anchored in my studies and friends. And living on campus made a huge difference, and it was very different because only 200 people lived on campus, which is really a very small number. But, I don’t know, I wish I could aid you more in that particular period that you concentrated on, but I certainly reacted like I’d been stuck with a pin, I know that [laughs]. I didn’t know that there was much that we could do about it; I think that part concerned me. I didn’t realize how forceful Ellen Futter must have been. Because Gildersleeve, I’m sure, was dead by then, and I don’t know whether McIntosh, well she may have taken a bigger part in it than I realized—but Ellen Futter was basically the defender, and she took on a whole university with, I’m sure, a phalanx of lawyers, but thankfully she was one herself, so I know the skills they have. But she must have also been articulate, and she certainly had the Barnard alumnae in back of her, and they probably would be more firm, in some ways, than the students who only half realized, perhaps, what a long history Barnard had had, and what leadership it had had in women’s education. But, as I say, I certainly think—one of my reunion classes, we all had pages to ourselves—everyone, about every 10 years, the class—we have some very active people in our class who put out the yearbook—and they always ask for people to give them a whole page to comment on, if you wanted. And so I took advantage of it, and so I sort of shot my wad on those different classes and things. I know that we all felt very strongly, and as I said, I feel that Barnard has been with me all the way, all through my life. And what I learned there was absolutely essential for going into non-fiction writing. I was a writer, editor, and, ultimately, newspaper reporter, and the kind of cultural background you get at a place like Barnard—plus what I had learned from my own family—gave me an advantage because I knew references and things—I would know what they meant—and I could refer to them too, where appropriate. Barnard had a huge, huge influence on my life—and a good influence.

E. Moye:

And in your opinion it needed to stay separate from Columbia?

B. Collins:

Oh, well I knew that there were tremendous advantages to staying separate, and it was just the idea that after all the work that had been put into the college, that they should have the nerve to try to take us over, and through the control of the purse strings of course. So that was key. I don’t know how Ellen did it, but she did it. I take my hat off to her.

E. Moye:

Okay, well that is great! I think we can end there and again, thank you so, so much for your time.