

*At a meeting of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences on April 11, 2000, the following Minute was placed upon the records.*

## W. JACKSON BATE

Born: May 23, 1918

Died: July 26, 1999

W. Jackson Bate, A. Kingsley Porter University Professor *Emeritus*, stands as one of the leading biographers and humanists of the twentieth century. His *John Keats* (1963) and *Samuel Johnson* (1977) remain authoritative and popular. Still in print in 2000, both attracted the highest accolades, a Pulitzer Prize for each, an award until then given exclusively for biographies of American subjects. The Johnson study earned the National Book Award and the National Book Critics' Circle Award. Securing a scholarly hat trick still unequaled, Bate won the Christian Gauss Award of Phi Beta Kappa three times, for the Keats biography, for *The Achievement of Samuel Johnson* (1955), a penetrating study of Johnson's moral and critical thought (what Bate once characterized as "Johnson-without-Boswell"), and for *The Burden of the Past and the English Poet* (1970), originally given as the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto. The germ of this last study, the intimidating pressures of past great achievements, he first published in 1964.

Hundreds if not thousands of undergraduates and dozens of graduates still regard Bate as the best, most generous, most memorable teacher they knew. Doctors, lawyers, accountants, scientists, and people in business, even though they did not receive degrees in literary studies, remark on the lifelong impact of his teaching. Bate was fond of quoting Johnson's statement in the "Life of Gray," that by the "common sense of readers uncorrupted with literary prejudices" must poetical honors finally be decided. His legendary course *The Age of Johnson* often drew several hundred students for twenty-five lectures, half of which he devoted to a sympathetic, detailed portrayal of Johnson's life and work, fusing the two without resorting to simplistic connections. In the late 1960s, the student "Confidential Guide" to courses, often flippantly critical, simply called him "the great Bate."

He loved biography because, as Johnson remarked, it could be put to use. In his hands, the genre displayed novelistic breadth and fascination yoked to expert yet accessible criticism. He sustained the directly human element of literary study – the relation of literature to felt experience and to life at large, yet never cheapened it by reductive interpretation. He explored the personal drama and sheer struggle of literary production and the psychology of achievement generally in all fields; he spoke eloquently about figures as diverse as Newton, Lincoln, William James, and Churchill.

He loved Keats's idea of an "immortal freemasonry" of great expressive spirits who might act as guides or friends, as sources of hope, to the individual faced with life's difficulties and tragedies. His concept of the humanities was broad, encompassing philosophy, linguistics, religion, history, music, and art. He thought formalistic studies valuable, but chiefly as they served larger ends. Late in life he worried about increasing academic specialization. He feared that the humanities could easily pursue for long periods, as they had in the past, the merely novel, the trivial, or the narrowly professional. "The humanities," he once remarked to John Paul Russo in a 1986 interview, "are always digressing and they can be used . . . for any purpose. But what is misused in the sciences is the result, whereas the approach in the humanities can be infinitely diverse, and wayward, perverse as well as diverse, foolish, trivial, as the result of airy opinion, impulse, caprice, and can be twisted by . . . envy, rivalry, prejudices of all kinds. Johnson says the first step in greatness is to be honest. If there can be simply a facing up to the essentials of common experience, the humanities can almost in a moment shake themselves into sanity." As he said of Johnson, he was always "turning a thing upside down and shaking the nonsense out of it."

Born on May 23, 1918, in Mankato, Minn., Bate attended public schools in Richmond, Ind., where his father served as superintendent of schools until 1932. A hit-and-run car severely injured Bate at age five. He lost so much blood it was feared he would die. The accident affected his sympathetic nervous system; later, as a young man, he underwent a "sympathectomy," a surgical severing of parts of that system. The operation was new. It was performed in the grand amphitheater of Massachusetts General Hospital, where dozens of doctors and residents witnessed it. The procedure precluded military service, and the after effects of this injury were felt throughout his life. Bate's happiest memories of childhood were of school. He loved the old Readers and acted in little plays. At age six his first role was in a food play instructing students on a healthy diet; he played a Bag of Potatoes carried in by two other children. In high school he acted Canon Chasuble in *The Importance of Being Earnest*. His junior high play director expressed shock that Bate liked to read Rider Haggard and recommended Hardy instead. Bate's father prepared a long list of biographies and gave his second son ten cents for every one he read. This money Bate used to see motion picture matinees.

At Harvard he hoped at first to be an archaeologist, then concentrated in English. He received no scholarship, so Bate washed dishes and worked in Widener Library to pay his tuition. Freshman year, thinking that when an instructor in an hour exam asked for his students' opinion on, say, the transition from late Rome to Charlemagne, Bate would do just that, give his opinion, not the facts the teacher really expected, with the result that Bate got an E on most of his first tests. Yet his senior honors essay on Keats's phrase "negative capability," published as a book the year he graduated, secured for him a permanent place in romantic studies. However,

Harvard was still riddled with social prejudices, especially against a midwest boy poorly dressed and with manners considered sloppy. Though graduating *summa cum laude*, he could not obtain any graduate scholarship until Douglas Bush insisted on something and \$400 was awarded. Bate won several university prizes as a student, including the Bowdoin Essay Prize three times. He received his B.A. in 1939, his Ph.D. in 1942.

He did not relish graduate study. A seemingly endless round of Middle High German, Gothic, Old Norse, Frisian, Icelandic, Middle Scots, and what he later called "other recondite tongues," the grammars and textbooks for which were mostly written in German and often printed in Fraktur, excluded almost any literary sensibility. Bate was fond of quoting the observation of William Allan Neilson, former Harvard Professor and President of Smith College, that the Egyptians took only five weeks to make a mummy, but the Harvard English Department required five years. Bate revered philology when pursued with imagination, tact, and human reference, and respected those who knew the older languages, but he could not see graduate training in English Literature, as it then was, consisting chiefly in philology. After 1980, he lamented the truth that many current English doctoral recipients know only one language well enough to use it in scholarship. His own translation of Horace's Epistle to the Piso family, the *Ars poetica*, was published in 1952. He learned to read poetry with Robert Hillyer and throughout his life recited a large repertoire from memory beautifully.

While he was in his twenties both parents died. He resented his mother's firm Christian Science faith, which undoubtedly hastened both her death from diabetes and her husband's from a strangulated hernia for which he refused treatment. More happily, Bate was elected a Junior Fellow in the Society of Fellows in 1942. There he met Alfred North Whitehead, who influenced his career strongly, as did Bush and John Livingston Lowes. Bate's doctoral thesis became *The Stylistic Development of John Keats* (1945). He then delivered the Lowell Lectures, published as *From Classic to Romantic* (1946), a pioneering work on the shift in taste from the eighteenth century into romanticism. Bate insisted on studying the two together and thought curious the boundary that divided specialists in later eighteenth-century literature from those in romanticism. He wrote articles on Bishop Percy's *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* and on William Hazlitt.

Among the first modern scholars to revive interest in Hazlitt's criticism, he included Hazlitt in his anthology *Criticism: The Major Texts* (1952), a book in print until 1997. Its lengthy introductions, published as a separate volume in 1959, form perhaps the best short history of criticism in the west--not as detailed as Saintsbury's nor Wellek's, nor as complete as Wimsatt's, but more engaging and cleaving with insight to essentials. His view of recent critical theory was not so much hostile as

regretful that it often ignored the links between living and reading, frequently reinvented not only the wheel but the cart as well, and had tied itself into academic knots over fine distinctions that meant little outside a group of initiates communicating in jargon-filled prose. If the humanities were chasing away much of their own audience, he blamed it on "the attempt to imitate the sciences and on the emphasis to publish or perish." He was more interested in literature as the record of gifted spirits who struggle to see the fragmentary nature of life whole, and who themselves are often painfully aware of the disparity of their attempts to do this in their own lives compared with their writings. Drawn to writers who recognized, as he put it, paraphrasing Willa Cather, "the importance of losing one's being in something larger than one's self," he did not shy away from the use of literature as moral exemplum.

Following World War II, Bate had undertaken with a friend the running of a dairy farm in Charlton, Mass. With typical self-deprecation, he reflected that the brown cover of the first edition of his criticism anthology approximated that of the laborer's hand working long and hard in cow fields. Later, he bought an old farm in southern New Hampshire and over the years, with his life-long friend and fellow professor David Perkins, fixed it up, purchasing with royalties from his books additional fields and woods to save them from development. He joked that this farm offered a yearly crop of what every New Englander could rely upon: rocks. Bate spent vacations and summers there when not traveling. The farm reinforced his love of New England writers such as Mary Wilkins Freeman and Sarah Orne Jewett and especially Robert Frost, who as a boy from California came to the rural area of Jack's farm and there first experienced his adopted region north of Boston. At Harvard, Bate lived in five undergraduate Houses, longest in Eliot, and was a regular conversationalist with students in the dining halls, day in and out.

Bate edited or coedited four volumes of periodical essays for the Yale Edition of the *Works of Samuel Johnson*. He edited Burke for the Modern Library. In 1983 he published with James Engell the standard edition of Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*. His own study of Coleridge (1968), while not a full-scale biography, remains in the judgment of many the best introduction to Coleridge's diverse achievements and difficulties. As with all Bate wrote, it is eminently readable. He said this book, growing out of seminars he taught with Professor David Perkins (the nursery of several books by other seminar participants), gave him more trouble to compose than longer studies. In the late 1970s, so widely read and regarded was the Johnson biography--it later was listed among the top 100 books of the century--that Bate was featured, remarkably, in *People* magazine. Yet, it is true that few scholars have in their writing so successfully bridged high culture and popular best-selling book culture. In 1986 Bate and Perkins published an anthology, *British and American Poets: Chaucer to the Present*. Yes, Bate wrote and edited many books; yet

it is worth noting, too, that no American humanist of the past century is more frequently named the dedicatee of books written by others.

Bate chaired the Harvard English Department for nine years and the Degree Program in History and Literature for one. He provided wise and effective leadership much valued by colleagues. He nominated for an honorary degree Helen Keller, who received one. He was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, the American Philosophical Society, the British Academy, the Cambridge Scientific and the Saturday Clubs. He received two Guggenheim Fellowships and the Harvard Faculty Prize. Numerous institutions, including the University of Chicago, Colby College, Indiana University, and Boston College, conferred on him honorary degrees. For health and personal reasons he declined the Eastman Visiting Professorship at Oxford in the early 1980s. His British acquaintances and friends included C.M. Bowra and Kathleen Tillotson. He dedicated the Johnson biography to Geoffrey Tillotson. Bate was a life-long friend of the Johnsonian scholar and collector Mary Hyde, now Viscountess Eccles, with whom he served on the Editorial Committee of Johnson's works.

Bate possessed a sense of humor ranging from the fanciful to the wicked, but inclining less to condescending irony and combative common room wit, more to what deeply reveals character and value. But, while capable of child-like wonder, he was also not afraid to practice Shaftesbury's maxim that ridicule is the test of truth. His ability to get at pivotal points could produce withering critiques of intellectual laxity and hypocrisy, yet he refrained ever from printing these. In the 1950s, when one uncollegial member of the department departed for another university, Bate applied the remark once made about William Lyon Phelps's leaving Harvard for Yale, that by his move the quality of both institutions had been raised.

Bate loved personal anecdotes. Many emerged in Harvard stories, occasionally irreverent, of Charles Eliot, Lawrence Lowell, Whitehead, Lowes, Kenneth Murdock, James Conant, George Lyman Kittredge, Bush, Arthur Darby Nock, Fred Robinson, Hyder Rollins, Harley Granville-Barker, George Sarton, Werner Jaeger, T.S. Eliot, McGeorge Bundy, Samuel Morrison, Archibald MacLeish, Leonard Bernstein (his classmate), and others, all of whom, with the exception of President Eliot, Bate knew personally, many intimately. His reading for pleasure included narrative history (Gibbon, Macaulay, Prescott, and numerous twentieth-century historians), adventure or historical novels (Sabatini and O'Brien as well as Haggard), and detective fiction (Arthur Conan Doyle, S.S. Van Dine, and Agatha Christie). In politics he disliked the liberalism of Harvard's Cambridge circles whenever it ripened into smugness and cant, yet admired Bobby Kennedy, abhorred the lies of Nixon, and trembled at the growing gulf between rich and poor here and internationally.

About Bate's intellectual stance in teaching, a former graduate student, now professor, Thomas Kaminski, said simply: "He believed in genius," yet was "profoundly aware that the greatest gifts did not exempt their possessor from . . . the burdens of our common humanity. . . . He tended not to criticize graduate students' work directly but to ask questions about it. 'Why did you say this here?' or 'If this is so, how do you account for . . .?'" The question would often seem very simple, but it would get right to the heart of an issue." A former undergraduate tutee, David Wright, now a television producer, remarked, "They talk about doctors who 'treat the whole patient'--a rarity in the days of HMO's. . . . In an era when teaching too seems to involve a kind of 'managed care' . . . Jack Bate [was] rare indeed." He brought "friendship and mischief and decency . . . to his teaching." Bate's lecture style, conversational and engaged, emotional but not histrionic, always centered on the effects that literary study might have on how we act and what we value. He gave his students what he said Johnson had given so many, the greatest gift that any human can give another, the gift of hope: that human nature can overcome its frailties and follies and, in the face of ignorance and illness, can through courage still carve out something lasting and worthwhile, even something astonishing, something that will act as a support and friend to succeeding generations.

Jack Bate died of heart failure in Boston on July 26, 1999, six days after surgery for esophageal cancer. Following his wishes, the body was cremated without funeral services. In religion, some have called him agnostic, but he believed in a transcendent power of love, and conceived the universe to be in a state of constant process that might attain higher order, intelligence, and compassion, but only if sentient beings capable of exercising free will would participate with, and actively help, whatever power or spirit had created the cosmic puzzle to begin with.

He is survived by one sister and eleven nephews and nieces. They scattered his ashes at the New Hampshire farm.

Respectfully submitted,

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Leo Damrosch  
David Perkins  
Michael Shinagel  
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