

Robert Hicks Bates '29; '44, '50 (Hon.)

Instructor in English, Emeritus (1911–2007)

Robert Hicks Bates was born in Philadelphia, PA, on January 14, 1911. Highlights of his education include early study at the Penn Charter School, two years at Phillips Exeter, and five years at Harvard—the latter graduating him magna cum laude in 1933 and then granting him a master's in English literature in 1934. [During] the school year 1934–35, he taught English at Penn Charter, following which he joined the English Department of the University of Pennsylvania. In the fall of 1939, he returned to Exeter as a faculty member. “I rather like Exeter and Exeter people,” he wrote in his letter accepting the position. It turned out that Exeter, both the school and the town, very much liked him in return.

In 1938, the year previous, Bob had made an historic attempt on K2, the second-highest mountain in the world. Although his team did not reach the summit, their remarkable accomplishments secured for Bob an international reputation as a mountaineer. That reputation, combined with his personal warmth and conspicuous competence, led to many requests for his services, and the Academy displayed both generosity and wisdom in granting Bob a significant number of leaves during his 37-year career. From 1941 to 1946, he was in the Army; in 1953, he made his second attempt on K2; in 1962, he served as the first director of the Peace Corps in Nepal; in 1966, he worked as a consultant for Outward Bound nationwide; and in 1974, he finished his biography of the noted artist and mountaineer Belmore Browne. Bob retired from PEA in 1976, and though centered in the town of Exeter, he continued to interact with people worldwide. On September 13, 2007, Bob died in his sleep at the age of 96; his beloved wife, Gail, at his side, as she had been for 53 years.

Bob would have wanted this Minute to end at this point, since “life should be lived and not analyzed.” But the life he led insists on detail. For most people in the world, to think of Bob Bates is to think first of his exploits as a mountaineer. And those exploits *were* indeed astonishing. Even what he remembered as his first summit is note-

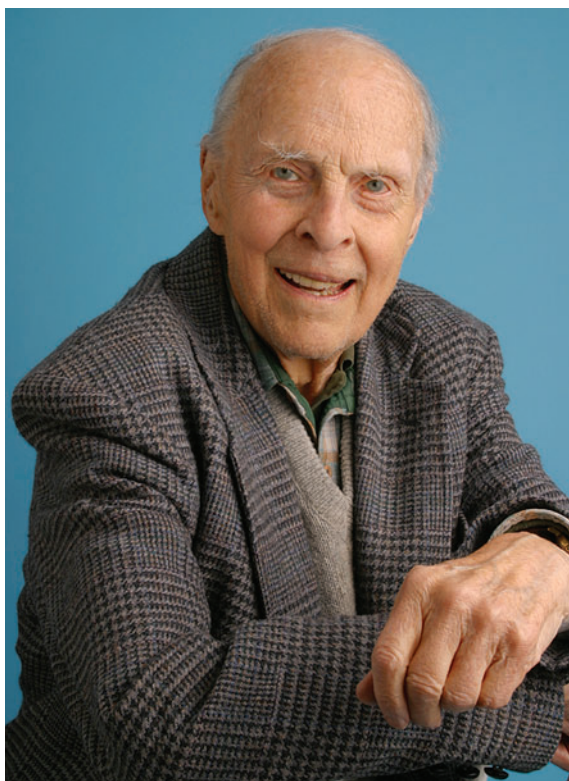
worthy, for he was only 5 years old when, in the company of his parents, he conquered the 284-foot Flying Mountain on the coast of Maine. The final mountain that he attempted was Ulugh Muztagh in China, close to 22,000 feet higher than Flying Mountain and at the time, the highest unclimbed mountain of the world. Bob climbed

nearly 20,000 feet but left it to other members of the team to gain the summit. Bob's deference was understandable: He was 74 at the time.

Between these two expeditions were climbing accomplishments that are legion and legendary: in 1935, a winter-long expedition mapping 5,000 square miles of unexplored territory in the Yukon; in 1937, a harrowing first ascent of Mount Lucania, until that time the highest unclimbed peak in North America; challenging climbs on mountains that wrapped around the world, from Mount McKinley in Alaska to Ojos del Salado in Chile, and from Mount Washington to the Himalayas; and, of course, the two historic attempts on K2, chronicled in *Five Miles High* (1939) and *K2: The Savage Mountain* (1954), both co-authored with Charles Houston and others. Bob's autobiography, *The Love of Mountains is Best: Climbs and Travels from K2 to Kathmandu* (1994), is reflective of the attitude he brought to all such expeditions. So

are his words about the long winter in the Yukon: “I think I got a bigger kick out of that than any other expedition. We spent the winter with a dog team in new country where nobody had been before. We named two big mountains we found. We discovered the longest glacier that had ever been mapped outside of the polar region.” Clearly, the love of mountains, and of the vast, unpopulated spaces that they punctuated, was indeed best for Bob Bates.

Recognizing Bob's skill as a mountaineer, the U.S. Army asked him to test and improve equipment used by the 10th Mountain Division and then to train the troops that would use that equipment. While on leave from the Academy, Bob set up (at about 18,000 feet on the flanks of Mount McKinley) a makeshift lab in which he and his team tested everything from mukluks to paper underwear—in temperatures ranging from 0 to -60



Robert Bates shared his enthusiasm for life with students whom he treated as equals, inspiring them to be their best.

degrees Fahrenheit. One memorable day, Bob and others—almost in their spare time, it seems—made what was only the third ascent on the 20,300-foot mountain. His autobiography makes only brief reference to the feat, for this was a man not given to self-dramatization—however dramatic the circumstances. On July 17, 1946, the Army discharged Bob as a lieutenant colonel, honored with a Bronze Star and the Legion of Merit. It was time to return to Exeter.

That change of venue did not, of course, lessen Bob's love of mountains, so he found a way to integrate that love into the profession that he had embraced. In the fall of his first year back, John Stone '49; P'77 knocked on Bob's door, eager to reveal to a teacher he knew only as an internationally-renowned mountain climber, his *own* passion for the mountains. One passion combined with another to bring into being the Exeter Mountaineering Club. On weekends, Stone remembers, "a small group of students were led by Bob on exciting rock-climbing trips to Bald Head Cliff in Ogunquit, ME; to the granite boulders of Pawtuckaway State Park; and even to the cliffs of the White Mountains." The club thrived, and in the next 22 years, countless boys followed in Stone's footsteps—all of them influenced by Bob's passion for climbing and by his encouragement of them as his students. "My best teaching may have been with the Exeter Mountaineering Club," Bob said some years later, and perhaps he was right.

But Robert Anderson '35 might have demurred: "I believe Bob was the most inspiring teacher I have ever had," he has said. "At his urging, even the most reticent became articulate and vocal. For me, selfishly, the high point of Bob's career was the day he said, 'Write anything you want to write.'" That advice served Anderson well; he went on to write *Tea and Sympathy*, and many other plays and novels. But it also served those less gifted. On one occasion, a boy came to Bob discouraged with his prospects as a writer. Not as worldly as many of his peers, he said without confidence that he had done nothing more exciting than sit on a porcupine. "Well, write about sitting on a porcupine. I want to read that essay." One of Bob's greatest qualities was that he inspired people. "He didn't tell them to go out and do things," his wife Gail recalls, "but through his own enthusiasm for life he could make people feel that they could go out and do anything." In the spring of 1947, Bob received a letter from Roxbury Latin [School] informing him that he was being considered for the position of headmaster. His response is telling: "After five years of service in the Army and considerable administrative work, I have returned to Exeter this fall because I like teaching. I don't dislike administrative work, which has its fascination, but I prefer to teach." George Russell '50; P'75 knows well just how lucky Phillips Exeter is that such was Bob's preference. At the ceremony in 2000, when Russell formalized the unprecedented professorship that he had established to honor Bob, he said: "I'm just one student out of roughly 3,000 who were privileged to learn from Bob Bates. I wanted to establish the professorship in his honor, but he insisted that my name go on it, too. I only know one Bob Bates. There must be others out there who are as caring, compassionate and down-to-earth, but I don't know anyone else like him. He formed my character and made me who I am today."

Those qualities and Bob's groundbreaking work as director of

the Peace Corps in Nepal led Sargent Shriver P'72 in 1963 to ask him to head the fledgling program in Tanganyika, but Bob turned down the offer so that he could once again return to the Exeter he so loved. Before leaving Kathmandu, Bob and Gail had met Tsering Yangdon P'96, a Tibetan refugee from Lhasa, who so impressed them that they arranged to have her come to study at the University of New Hampshire and continue at Johns Hopkins for a master's degree in public health. So much a part of the Bates' family did Tsering and her son, Nima Taylor Binara '96, become, that Nima spoke at Bob's memorial service. But they are only two of the hundreds who think of Bob and Gail as their personal touchstones. More than parental figures, Bob and Gail treated their young friends as equals, always inspiring them to find their potential, to risk being the best and to learn from their mistakes. But above all, it may be Bob's wide smile that his friends remember most.

An excellent storyteller, even funny, Bob instilled confidence in his students through competence. He taught them to risk danger, to love survival, and to break into song on any occasion. Anyone who attended Bob's memorial service at Phillips Church will never forget Nick Clinch and Tom Hornbein spontaneously reflecting Bob's spirit as they sang, "The Wreck of Ol' '97," with train toot and all. Bob loved his life and was willing and able to share it effortlessly with students in the classroom, in the dorms, and in the numerous clubs he advised. Sometimes five generations deep, Bob and Gail Bates' extended family hails from around the world.

As much as the world called to them, however, Bob and Gail never lost their attachment to, and love of, their local community. And they led the way in its protection, putting land in Hampton Falls under easement, for example, and preventing the historic Dudley House from being razed in favor of a bank. In a letter asking for better care for the Tilton Tattersall House, then the second-oldest house in the Exeter Historic Commercial District, Bob concluded with the following: "I believe there is urgency for action." Similarly, Gail established an endowed fund to permanently support the Robert H. Bates Mountaineering Room in the Class of 1945 Library and the valuable collection of books it protects. The room also offers a way to protect the spirit of the man who collected those books. It may be that those books will stir in some future students the passion for mountains stirred so many years ago in John Stone, and the spirit of the room's namesake will give those students the confidence to follow their own passions as he followed his. Bob Dodson '43; P'70, P'76 alludes succinctly to that spirit: "It was the exposure to [Bob's] character and personality that was so influential. He [was] simply a wonderful human being." Let that be the last word and living memory of Robert Hicks Bates. ●

This Memorial Minute was written by Edouard Desrochers '45, '62 (Hon.); P'94, P'97; Jef Fellows '62; Peter Greer '58, '71, '81, '83, '97, '00 (Hon.); P'81, P'83, P'94; Rick Schubart '56, '78, '79, '93, '03, '08; P'96, P'00, P'04; Charles Terry '28 (Hon.); P'80, P'81; and Jamie Hamilton P'08, P'11, chair, and was presented at faculty meeting on April 29, 2009.