

In Search of 'The Darce'

Few Exeter faculty members have inspired as many legends as English teacher Darcy Curwen (1891–1967), who bestrode the campus wearing a cape and spouting quips that became known as “Curwenisms.” Two years ago, science department chair Kathleen Curwen, who is married to one of Curwen’s grandsons, went looking for the man behind the stories. She found him in letters from more than 80 of his former students, a search that also yielded insights into the timeless essence of great teaching.

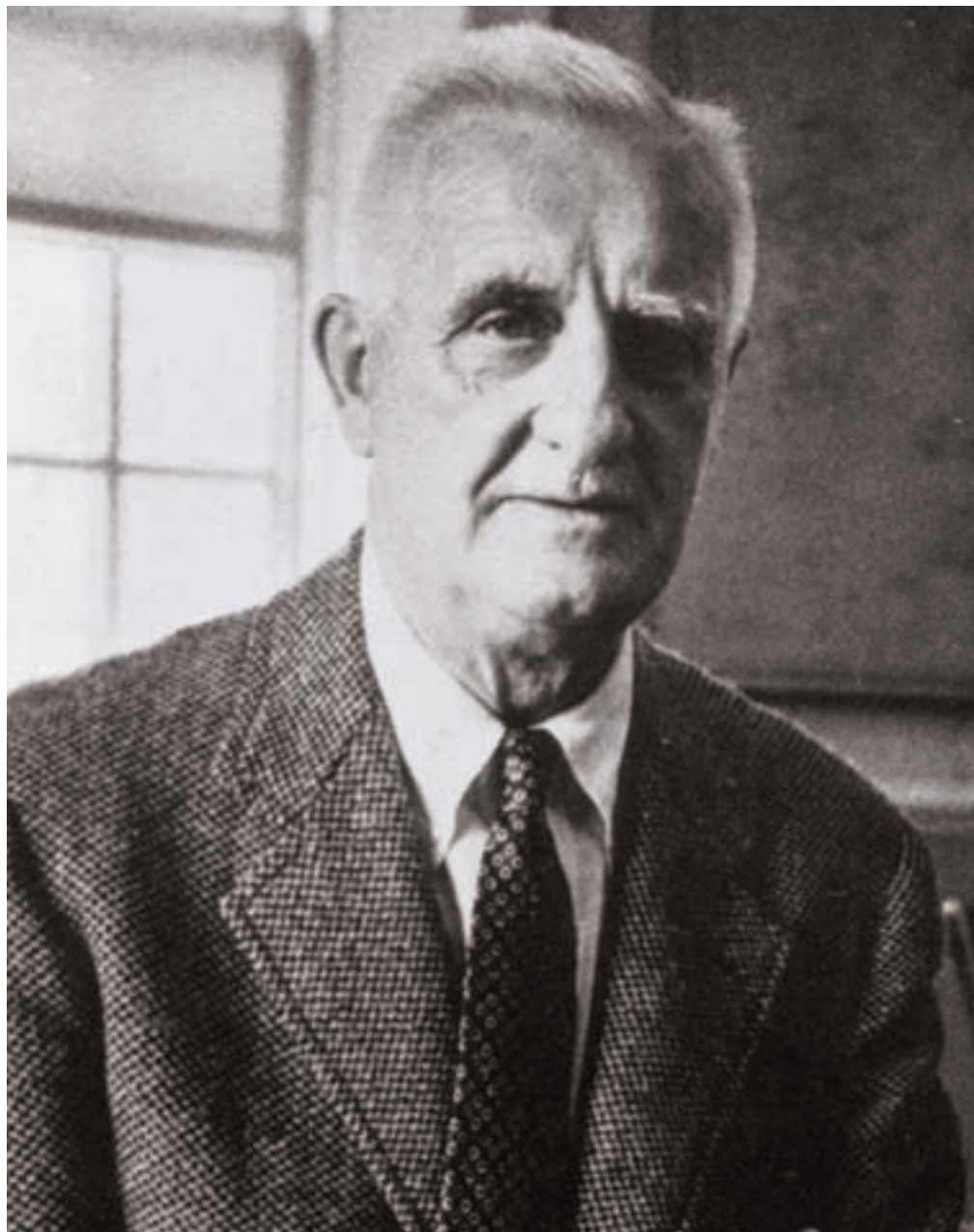
By Kathleen Curwen

In the fall of 1988, I was teaching human nutrition and biochemistry to college and graduate students at the University of New Hampshire.

I happened to hear about a theatrical production called *Food Fright* that was being presented in the assembly hall here at the Academy. *Food Fright* was a series of skits about eating disorders, and the skits had been set to music. Since it was open to the public, I drove over to see the performance and stayed for the question-and-answer period that followed the show. The performance was very good. What impressed me even more than the show, however, was the audience. Here were high school students spending a free evening in the middle of the week attending a function that was not required.

They were engaged, articulate, curious and respectful as they entered into dialogue with the actresses. Up until that evening I had never considered the possibility of teaching at a high school. By the time I was walking out of the Assembly Hall, I was absolutely convinced that I wanted to teach at Exeter.

The next week I called the chair of the science department and sent in my résumé. The chair asked me to include some references, so I made a quick visit



to my mentor to ask him to write to the Academy on my behalf. He was horrified. “Kath,” he said, “you *really* don’t want to teach at that place. They haven’t been coed for very long and anyway, they have no use for women. I hear they have a revolving-door policy for female faculty. You’ll never get tenure. I know you, and Exeter is not a good fit. Teachers haven’t changed there since the days of the dinosaurs.”

I thought carefully about what my mentor had to say, but when the job offer came, I accepted immediately.

A little later, when I received a written contract from Principal Kendra Stearns O’Donnell, she wrote: “I hope that you will bring back the magic of the Curwen name at Exeter.” I was both surprised and pleased that she made the connection that she

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This article is adapted from a meditation that Kathleen Curwen delivered on February 5, 2006. In July, Curwen will succeed Barbara Eggers as dean of faculty. For more about her appointment, see page 4.

did. My husband's grandfather, Henry Darcy Curwen, was a faculty member here at the Academy for 35 years, between 1924 and 1959. He taught English, chaired the English department, coached boys crew and lived in three different dormitories. I'm sorry to say I never met Darcy; he died long before I married into the Curwen family.

Just after I started teaching, I got a call from an alumnus who had seen my profile in the *New Faculty Newsletter* and wanted to know if I was related to Darcy Curwen. He told me that he was getting ready to move to a retirement home and he was cleaning out the attic of his longtime family residence. He still had all of the original papers from his English classes with Darcy Curwen, and he planned on taking them with him to his new home. He also told me that of all the people who had made a difference in shaping his life, Darcy was by far the most influential.

Shortly thereafter, at an alumni/ae dinner, I met another alumnus who noticed my nametag and once again asked about the connection. "Do you teach the way he did?" he asked. I didn't think so. After all, I was in science and Darcy had been in English, and our time at Exeter was separated by several decades. "Good," he responded, "because if you do, you'll be out on your ear in no time flat. Times have changed."

And so it went for years and years, as men from around the country would approach me and share their stories

about Darcy. A few were critical, but the overwhelming majority were remarkably positive and vivid. I must admit I was intrigued. Who was this man? What was he really like? As time went on, I knew that I needed to learn as much about Darcy as I could. I began to ask questions of my husband's family members. I asked *The Exeter Bulletin* to run a small ad for me, requesting information about Darcy. I expected a small trickle of responses, but it became rapidly apparent that I had opened up a floodgate. For months and months, letters poured in from all over the country by email and by snail-mail. Some arrived on fancy professional stationery inked by laser printers, others were banged out on old manual typewriters with sticky keys, and still others were written by hand on lined paper from yellow legal pads. All told, I received 85 letters, from gentlemen who are now in their 60s, 70s, 80s and 90s.

Not only did I get responses, but many of my correspondents sent original copies of their English papers graded by Darcy, along with letters that Darcy had written to them over their

summer vacations or long after they had graduated from Exeter. I was stunned. I was also honored. Here I was, a scientist by trade, doing archival research with original sources for the first time in my life. It has been a very exciting process and I am deeply grateful to the men who helped me. I would like to share some of their stories with you now.

NO NONSENSE

Henry Darcy Curwen was born in England in 1891 into what might be described as a no-nonsense family. After all, when Darcy's uncle misbehaved in school, giving a classmate a haircut, the boy's father (and Darcy's grandfather) was so enraged that he apprenticed the youngster to a barber in Tasmania. He never returned to England, and today there is a thriving clan of Curwens living down under.

Darcy and his family moved to Quincy, MA, in 1901, where he attended Thayer Academy, and when he graduated, his father insisted that he go to M.I.T. to become a naval architect. Darcy had other ideas; he wanted to attend Harvard. His father refused to support him financially if he did not attend M.I.T., so Darcy had to work his way through college. His primary source of income was tutoring. In the summer after his freshman and sophomore years, he lived with well-off families in New York state and then Canton, OH, while he tutored their children. Canton agreed with him, and there he met and began courting his future wife, a young woman named Carrie Lynch.

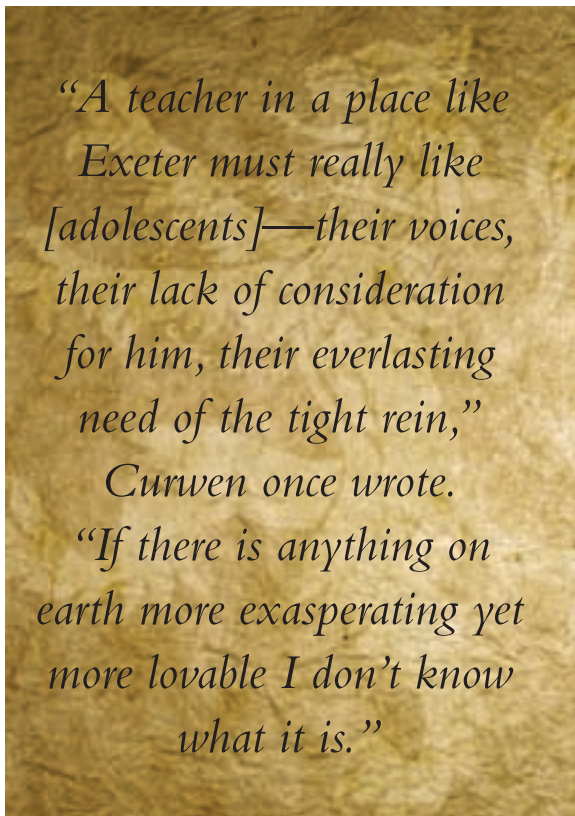
He returned to Harvard for his third year, but the academic grind and the hardship of paying his own way made his life difficult. He dropped out of college, returned to Ohio, and in 1916 he married Carrie Lynch. Darcy had a brief stint in advertising and then took a job in a melt shop at a steel plant, working 12-hour shifts. He began to think about returning to Harvard and finishing his degree, but by now he had an infant as well as a wife to consider. His in-laws built a cottage on their farm in Canton where Carrie and his son could live, allowing Darcy to return to Harvard.

When he arrived back in Cambridge, he picked metallurgy as his major but then discovered that Harvard's expert on metallurgy was away on sabbatical. Darcy enrolled in some English classes instead and quickly realized that studying and teaching English were his calling. When he graduated in 1924, Harvard offered Darcy a position as an instructor in the history department. That same year, Phillips Exeter offered him a position as an instructor in the English department.

A FLAIR FOR THE DRAMATIC

Here is where the real story begins. Darcy was a big man, six-foot-three, and physically imposing. He was very theatrical, and wore a tweed cape when he strode across the quads. He spoke with a booming voice of authority, often with a British accent. Many of his students found him austere and intimidating, if not terrifying, when they first met him. Bill Dietel '45, who later went into

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teaching himself, wrote, "Darcy set high standards for himself and expected others to be as dedicated as he was to the all-important task and craft of teaching."

Darcy was intolerant when it came to behavior he deemed lazy or morally lacking. To his face, he was Mr. Curwen, but behind his back, he was called "the Darce." In the words of James Paul '59, "These were the days when Exeter was more stern than tender." Another alumnus, Richard Davis '44, wrote, "He was brilliant, inspiring and demanding, but never condescending or arrogant. In the academic settings of today [his] behavior, which was embarrassing for the students but accepted as justified reprimand, would be totally out of bounds." Added Bill Bynum '54, "By today's standards his behavior in the classroom would be considered politically incorrect," as would his nicknames for students, which included "cockroach," "wretch" and "miserable biped."

His quips in class were legendary, and came to be known as "Curwenisms." Here, courtesy of Grange Simons '49, Ralph Williams '49 and Joseph Merriam '41, are a few examples:

"Don't scratch your head, you wretch, you'll get splinters in your fingers."

"Straighten up, you buzzard, you are in the presence of great literature."

On the first day of class, he was apt to remark, "I won't give you any memorable instructions today, for they would simply bounce off your so-called intellects like hail off a tin roof."

He loved the English lan-

guage, wrote Addison Parker '33, and taught his students that it "is your only living gift from your ancestors. Treat it with respect. For any slang or swear word, there is a correct English word or expression. Use it." On the importance of word choice, Ed Matthews '54 recalled, Darcy would ask, "Why poke them with a pin, when you can slay them with a sword?"

Darcy was notorious for antics in the classroom, as well as for his grading policies. Hilliard Hughes '44 recalled that when a student gave an uninformed answer in class, Darcy was known to tap him on the head with a tuning fork. Then, holding the vibrating tuning fork to his own ear, he would say, "Sounds like a low D to me." If a student made what Darcy termed a "child's error" on a paper, it would cost him an entire grade point (from a B to a C). What constituted a child's error? According to Ed Matthews, the use of the word "and" instead of a semicolon to connect two independent clauses or using the phrase "you and I" when "you and me" was called for. Darcy considered a C to be a respectable grade. He often told his classes, "If you can write as well as I do, you get a B. If you can write as well as Shakespeare, you get an A." As Ramsey MacMullen '46 put it, Darcy was a teacher who employed "brilliant unscrupulous manipulation of the young in their own best interests."

Woe to you if you were foolish enough to chew gum in class. David Klausner '59 remembered that gum chewers in Darcy's top-floor classroom in Phillips Hall were told to "Chuck the gum out the window!" That command was swiftly followed by another:

"Oh no, we can't have littering—go down and pick it up!" This usually happened when there were several feet of snow on the ground.

A STRICT DISCIPLINARIAN

Outside the classroom, Darcy had a reputation for being a strict disciplinarian, in the dormitory and with his own three sons. While a student at Exeter, his youngest son, William, was caught with a bottle of wine in the dormitory. In those days, discipline cases were discussed and voted on by the full faculty, not a committee. Lawrence Fogelberg '59 recalled a rumor that when the full faculty voted on whether to expel his son, Darcy voted with the majority to do so. The truth is, Darcy withdrew his son from the Academy for the offense and sent him off to Governor Dummer for the next two years.

During a scarlet fever epidemic at the Academy, Darcy worried about the boys becoming depressed while quarantined in the infirmary. He arranged to get movies from the Ioka Theatre, and later from Boston, to show to the boys every Saturday night. After the epidemic passed, Darcy continued his weekly trips to Boston to get films and he showed them every Saturday night in Thompson Gymnasium. Fred Clarkson '41 recalled that one evening, a young starlet appeared on the screen in a tight sweater. The boys made wolf calls, drowning out the soundtrack. Darcy turned the projector off and turned on the lights in the gym. He chastised the boys and refused to resume the show until they quieted down.

In the dorm, Darcy demanded quiet during study hours. At that time, boys stud-

ied in their rooms at their desks with their doors open. When Darcy heard noise erupting from some far-off corner in the dorm, it was reputed that he would take off one shoe and walk with a heavy footfall towards the source. The unsuspecting students could never quite understand how he arrived at their door in half the time they anticipated he would.

For this next story, I have read dozens of versions on the theme, but here is the gist of it. If a student allowed the door to his room in the dormitory to slam closed, Darcy would ask the student to take the door off its hinge and do without a door for several days, in order to learn how to be quieter. One evening, the boys in Cilley Hall sought revenge. With the help of posted guards on every floor, the boys systematically slammed every door in the building, in unison, one floor at a time. The racket was deafening. Darcy came out into the dorm to quell the banging, but on whatever floor he visited, all he could find were boys busily studying at their desks. Unable to put an end to the mayhem, he returned to his apartment, realizing the pranksters had gotten the best of him. But not for long. The next day, when the boys returned to their dorm in the evening after classes, every door in the entire dormitory had been removed from its hinges and placed in storage. Darcy did not say a word to the boys. It was two weeks before the doors were returned.

CURMUDGEON OR PUPPY DOG?

Was he really such a curmudgeon? Was he really so tough? If so, why did Jon Olmstead '60 refer to him as a "puppy dog," while Eric

Beckjord '47 remarked that "his bark was worse than his bite." There are many stories of his kindness and sensitivity to the boys in his charge. He took a special liking to boys who came from small-town high schools from far away, boys who were not used to the kind of academic rigor that Exeter had to offer and may well have had only modest ability. He worked long hours to tutor these students and to help them improve their writing.

When an already homesick Franklin Bennett '53 discovered that his new pen and pencil set, a birthday present from his parents, had been stolen, it was the last straw for him. He approached Darcy to tell him that he wanted to leave the Academy and return home. Darcy listened to him intently, then asked him to change into comfortable clothes and come back to his apartment. When he returned, the student found two other boys in Darcy's living room. Darcy and his wife, Carrie, took the three boys out to the ocean for a walk along the beach and then for ice cream. Aware of the student's financial concerns and the importance of the missing pen and pencil set, Darcy offered to keep the student's allowance in his own apartment for safekeeping from that point forward. In a follow-up letter to the boy's parents, Darcy wrote, "Some misbegotten bastard stole your son's pen and pencil set."

In another letter, written to the parents of Ramsey MacMullen '46 in December, 1945, Darcy wrote, "This A [that your son earned in my course] represents, I think a certain flair for my subject, but also very distinct & tangible effort. He is to be congratulated. You must feel pride in hav-

ing so talented a son. I hope that he has a good vacation and that your own holiday will be happier for your having him again at home with you."

Darcy corresponded with some of his former students for over two decades. He wrote about why he had chosen teaching as a profession, and why Exeter was a great school. To D.W. Coates '49, he commented, "No money, no buildings, no system is a substitute for devotion [to teaching]." He described teaching to Tim Coggeshall '40 as "a vocation, or way of life—not a way to earn a living. Nobody ever gets rich at it. A teacher in a place like Exeter must really like [adolescents]—their voices, their lack of consideration for him, their everlasting need of the tight rein. If there is anything on earth more exasperating yet more lovable [than students] I don't know what it is. A teacher must live a teacher's life: and often his life seems quite hostile to family life. It is hard work. Like a fireman, a teacher is always on duty." Darcy also warned Coates, "Don't fall into the current mania of ascribing too much to teachers. They are craftsman, not miracle workers, and no man was ever a good teacher unless he had good pupils."

What do you think? Was my mentor right? Has the essence of what makes a great teacher and adviser remained the same despite the passage of the years? Are teachers today the same as they were 60 years ago? Or, on the contrary, have teachers and Exeter changed a great deal? I don't think you can really answer these questions unless you have the opportunity to step back and see the school through the eyes of the students and teachers who were here before us. ●

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number Mr. Hamilton had given us. He arrived with the rangers not long after, and he cried as he hugged us. I have a fuzzy memory of sitting in the ranger station wrapped in a blanket, drinking Campbell's tomato soup. The next morning, we piled in the van and headed back to Exeter—where, we learned, we had been given a standing ovation at morning assembly when it was announced that we had made it out of the woods.

As a young adult, this experience became one of the cornerstones of my confidence, giving me a sense of near-invincibility. "If I had the strength and steadiness to make it off that mountain," I concluded, "I can weather just about any crisis in life." For many years, I relied on the self-assurance I gained from that experience.

Twenty years later, now a teacher and school administrator myself, I happened to run into Peter Greer at a conference on school leadership. As we reminisced, I reminded him of that fateful trip to the White Mountains. He was silent for a moment, and then confessed that he had often thought about the trip. He was, he said, certain that our closeness as a group had enabled us to accomplish things that would have seemed impossible back in Exeter—one of the fundamental goals of the Outdoor Challenge program. But, he added, he sometimes wondered whether sending us on such a challenging climb without adults had been the wrong choice, even an irresponsible one.

I laughed and told him how much the trip had meant to me. But as I reflected, it dawned on me for the first time how utterly

vulnerable we had been. My sense of invincibility suddenly seemed brash and foolhardy. We had been lucky, I realized, just very lucky. Sure, we had shown grit and determination and strong teamwork, and these qualities had helped a great deal. But it suddenly felt naïve to conclude that because I had made it across one slippery tightrope, I could simply and easily beat the risks inherent in other situations.

As a dean of students in a boarding school for many years, I had seen adolescents take the most foolhardy risks. ("Relax, Mr. Murray, we had it fully under control. We called a cab and took him to the hospital as soon as he passed out.") I had cautioned students endlessly about risky behaviors and the false sense of security that can come from "surviving" a crisis. And yet here I was, unable for years to see that I, too, had simply been lucky.

So what do we make of our close calls? What do we learn from them? Acquiring life's lessons is a tricky business. Experience can be a great teacher, and it can lead to a certain confidence, but there are traps—the wiser conclusion may be less obvious and may take some searching. In this case, I learned, many years later, to re-examine my assumptions from time to time, because what once were certainties can change with time and perspective. ●

For many years the dean of students at Deerfield Academy,

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