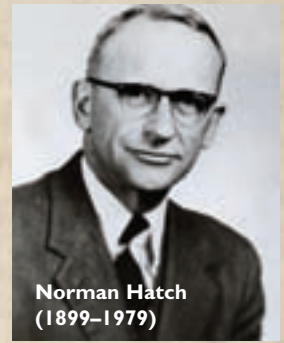


'Magnum Iter' With Norman Hatch

Like Darcy Curwen, Latin instructor Norman Hatch was a larger-than-life figure to his students, famous for his exacting standards and his impatience with those who fell short of them. Here, poet **Jack McCarthy '57** reflects on lessons he learned in Mr. Hatch's classroom, about Latin and about life.



Norman Hatch
(1899-1979)

I
We were ripe for intimidation
and the most inimitable intimidator
of all was Mister Hatch. He taught
Latin and his classroom was right
next the marble portal inscribed
Huc venite pueri ut viri sitis—
“Come this way, boys, that you may be men.”
The road to manhood ran past Mister Hatch.

He was the legend of legends.
To pass his room when Latin I
was getting out—the door bursts open
and 14 boys of wildly various sizes
various amounts of ankle showing
explode into the corridor
some of them in tears.
There they mill

like survivors of a terrorist bomb,
oblivious to traffic patterns, and to
passersby who haven't shared their
ordeal, comparing desperate notes—
“What did he say the homework was?”
“When do we have to have that memorized?”
“My brother—did my brother make it out?”
HAS ANYBODY SEEN MY BROTHER?”

What was so terrifying about him?
He was not a big man.
Refereeing a lacrosse game
he looked a tough enough little guy
all bulbs and wire
but nothing out of Stephen King.
Knobby knees and calf muscles, forehead,
but I doubt he weighed 140.

But put a sportcoat on him, close
him in that little room with us and he'd
bolt up and start to pace behind us
like a lion from the Serengeti loose
in a stableful of calves tethered
round an oval table, unable to turn
their heads, never knowing when
and where he might strike.

What *was* terrifying was his voice. Rumor
had it he'd been gassed in World War I.
In soft registers that voice was like
the whisper of a bullfrog, sometimes hard
to hear—which in itself was menacing—
inevitably, any uncaught word
came back to haunt you, and ask him
to repeat himself? Oh, come now.

In loud registers, his voice was a
lion's roar, not challenge, but a feral

non-negotiable demand for submission
the assertion of one species' absolute
power of life and death over another.
It didn't trigger adrenaline but
paralysis. In its middle registers—
no, his voice *had* no middle registers.

Each class was like a Bach organ piece
that started soft, one hand weaving
gentle melody fraught with inevitability
promise that before we're finished here
every key, every pedal, every stop
will have been exploited for maximum
dramatic and emotional effect, that
I am going to put you through

the wringer. Most terrifying of
all was the certainty that if
you had left just one thing undone
he would find you out
there was no place to hide
in that little room there
wasn't enough cannon
fodder it might take almost

all of his allotted 50
minutes but the undone task would
rise like a bubble to the surface
sit there calling, “*Mister Ha-atch*”
till he would wheel on you and you
would regret your oversight like
Troy regretted letting in that horse.
Once that door shut and locked us in

with him all that we could ever
be to each other was potential
decoys in this little herd
if he took you tonight
he might not get to me
so what if you were my best friend.
This was the optimum in training
for the corporate world.

I don't remember so much
the content of what he would say
when he caught you out
but it felt like, gently, “Why
don't you know
the present subjunctive of *sum*,
Mr. McCarthy?”
“I don't know, sir.”

“We've already established *that* you don't
know I was asking *why* you don't know.”
“I don't know why I don't know, sir.”
“Wasn't it the most important
thing in the world last night?”

“Of course it was, sir.”
Then a little more forcefully,
“*Have you ever in your life been asked to do*

*anything more important than memorize
the present subjunctive of the verb to be?*”
“No, sir.” Then bellowing,
like the Minotaur
thundering toward you
from every direction of the Labyrinth
“*THEN HOW COULD YOU
NOT HAVE DONE IT?*”
“*I don't know, sir!*”

And I was one of the lucky ones.
I didn't have Mister Hatch till senior year
Latin IV Special. We were *quam optimi*,
as good as it got. We had learned our chops in
the less surreal classrooms of the Stuckeys,
and the Galbraiths, and the Coffins, and we
knew our stuff or we wouldn't have been there.
And if he treated preps as *barbari*

for the simple reason they did not know
Latin, he respected us because we did.
Not that we didn't at times disappoint him
times his outrage was compounded by
knowledge we had come so far, that this
once-great school had fallen on such evil times
that Mr. McCarthy could arrive in this class
without knowing the meaning of *vereor*—

which means what, Mr. Gates? (wheeling).
“I am terrified, sir.” “Correct.”
Did Gates really know?
or had he gotten lucky?
We had Mister Hatch at 5:25,
after sports, at the end of a long day
when we thought we were almost home free.
I remember that room always being dark.

There'd be a lamp on over his desk
and a floor lamp somewhere
but I don't think he ever
turned on the overhead light
and entering that room in the dark
months between October and April
was like entering the lair of a predator
who smelled like floorwax and old books.

But we were the favored sons
and whole classes could pass
without a spark catching his fuse.
Once even this: I was translating
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Norman Hatch

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a passage about the Cyclops, and the Latin had alliteration, so I went for it in my English, passing up the obvious “His feet struck the grass,” for

the marginally more ambitious “smote the sod,” and Mister Hatch said, “You have...” in that way he had of beginning a phrase before he had really had time to gather the entirety of his fragmented voice and we all froze because we knew that when he was moved enough to do that the *fasces* was about to fall

and he went on
“... the *nicest* way of coming up with just the right phrase in translation ...” and we sat there stunned.
I stammered, “Thank you, sir,” and risked a glance across the table at flabbergasted faces, Barzun, Leness and Marcus their bodies rigid

their breath still indrawn
nobody knowing what to do with this totally uncharacteristic lapse somehow more frightening than anything he’d ever done before.
It was probably from that moment I was fated to teach prep school Latin a few years myself.

II

That fall my mother died
and in adolescent bravado I promised my father I’d get Highest Honors for the fall term something I’d never been able to do.
I worked hard, would have made it except Mister Hatch gave me a B+ instead of the A- I had earned.

I dared approach him and he told me He’d deducted for some lines of poetry I’d failed to memorize. I wailed, “But that was extra credit,” and he painstakingly explained, like astronomy to a small child, “You can’t expect extra credit if there’s no deduction if it’s not done.”

Then, sensing the depth of my disappointment, he surprised me, offered, “Is there some reason this grade’s important to you?” But I hadn’t come looking for charity and I said no, left quickly so he wouldn’t know I cried. In March, when my classmates were deep into their *Aeneid* papers, my father died.

Returned to school I tried to weasel out of the paper, arguing I couldn’t concentrate, I was worried about things at home, what would become of my brother?

But Mister Hatch didn’t buy it, so I ended up throwing together over two all-nighters

a collage of quotes transcribed from impeccable sources but too obviously selected for their extravagant length. He gave me a D-, which let me graduate, but brought me down to C+ for the year—though it did not deny me third place on the Latin prize exam.

The next few years got ugly fast. I dropped out of Dartmouth, went down a labyrinth or two of my own devising. Maybe someday it will be of benefit to remember even those things. I came out the other side and at twenty-five was back at Dartmouth taking Latin and writing, finally,

an *Aeneid* paper good enough for presentation to the Classics Club. The central insight of that paper was supported by my discovery that in the first six books Aeneas weeps fourteen times; in the last six, once. A demonstrative, emotional Phrygian becomes a stoic, Augustan Roman,

culminating in his *Disce puer* speech to his son: “Learn from me, boy, about duty, about doing the right thing always. You’ll have to learn from someone else about happiness.” Mister Hatch, retired from Exeter and living in Vermont, was at the Classics Club that night. I introduced my paper with the story

of the Exeter D-, ending, “Mister Hatch, this paper is for you. I apologize for being eight years late.” I had survived, and I had come to love him. I’ve always felt that was the year that I became a man, never quite known why; having told this story I suspect that might have been the night.

III

Huc venite pueri ut viri sitis.
What did it mean, really? Never would we be men *unless* we came this way? It frightened me the first time that I read it, as though I knew intuitive my way to manhood would be terrible indeed. I always preferred the side door

of that building, unscribed, unpromising, unthreatening. But some read that inscription and declined to enter at all. Others came, but disappeared along the way. For some the obstacle was Mister Hatch’s class, to “Did my brother make it out?”

the answer was No. Yet surely they all came to manhood too. On different timetables, by different routes. If we survive the terrorism of our very maleness, we arrive. Sometimes working phonathons I get a man who confides, “I only stayed at Exeter a month,

but I still like to give something,” and I feel a special gratitude to him, but at the same time embarrassment, as though inadvertently I’ve raised some ancient shame. I want to ask him, “Was it Mister Hatch?” I want to tell him, “Yes,

we were a hard proud lot, who came that way and who survived.” Nobody called you a deserter but neither did Latin have a phrase for “conscientious objector.” You took the road less traveled by, and how much difference, really, did it make?

Magnum iter is an idiom; it looks like “great journey,” but it translates “forced march.” We were on a *magnum iter*. Sometimes in the long dark nights of those marches, we abandoned our *impedimenta*, the softnesses within us that were destined

not to serve us in the coming battle with *barbari* who would have every advantage over us except *virtus*, the stuff of manhood. We had to leave some of our *comites* to fend for themselves by roads in enemy territory. Today when we look back we see only a great journey and a victory

not a forced march never the casualties. But the issue never was that we be men, it was the kind of men we should become. And I want somehow to apologize for all of us to the man who left after a month.

And I want to ask if he by any chance remembers seeing, back beside the road he didn’t take, any of my *impedimenta*, my brother, or the last promise I made to my father. ●

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