

## FRANK CUSHWA: A LEGACY OF PASSIONATE TEACHING AT 100 | By Brooks Clark



Brooks Clark

*Beloved by his colleagues and students (including the writers Robert Benchley and James Agee), Frank Cushwa was “a skillful and sympathetic teacher who made a difficult subject living and thrilling.”*

*He was also a puzzle.*

One hundred years ago, Frank William Cushwa joined the Exeter faculty as an instructor in the English department.

At such a milestone, it's fitting to assess Cushwa's influence on the Academy over his 32-year tenure. “From the moment he joined the faculty,” wrote Myron R. Williams in *The Story of Phillips Exeter*, “he began arousing interests that had grown sluggish and set in motion new ones. Under him the English Department truly came of age, and he gave new life to the *Bulletin*, which he edited until 1933. The Davis Library, the *Monthly*, Academy lectures, funds for lectures and prizes, the Lantern Club, the Southern Club, the Musical Clubs, winter sports, new dormitories, the Art Department, the Dramatic Association, Phillips Church, the Problem Committee, the Harkness Plan—these and other things received from him either the initial impulse or much of the momentum to make them go.”

At the same time, the centennial of Frank Cushwa's arrival at Exeter presents a puzzle. It's not a puzzle we can solve, as much as we might like to, but it can perhaps draw us closer to a legacy of innovative teaching.

Cushwa grew up in Martinsburg, WV. He graduated from West Virginia University in 1902, got one master's degree at WVU in 1903 and another at Harvard in 1904, then taught at Choate for several years.

In his first year at Exeter, Cushwa, then 26, assigned his class to write an essay on a practical subject. One student, the future humorist Robert Benchley '08, sought out the local undertaker, who eagerly taught Benchley every gruesome detail of preparing a body for burial. Benchley's essay

nonplussed his teacher with its stomach-turning itemization of corpse-care. “Mr. Cushwa, who was young and rather shy, had a little trouble getting through it,” wrote Nathaniel Benchley '34 in *Benchley*, a biography of his father. “He could not deny, however, that it was practical. He cleared his throat, wiped his glasses, and gave it an A.”

Benchley carried his interest in embalming into his years as an Algonquin Round Table wit. He subscribed to undertakers' trade magazines, and when he and Dorothy Parker shared an office at *Vanity Fair*, they decorated their walls with cadaver illustrations, which they found hilarious. When their editor told Benchley and Parker to take the pictures down, it fueled the world-class humorists all the more.

Benchley and Parker befriended Donald Ogden Stewart '12, then an editor at *Life*. (Stewart later wrote humorous books and crafted many screenplays, including *The Philadelphia Story*, for which he won an Academy Award.) “One of the things which brought Robert Benchley '08 and me together at our first meeting 10 years later was our mutual affection for Cush,” wrote Stewart in *Exeter Remembered*, a collection of essays. “A more imaginative nickname [than Cush] would have been ‘Dr. Johnson.’ He was perfect for the part. His fat body moved awkwardly; his one good eye glared from his blotched face as he grunted out his angry judgments. We loved him. His Shakespeare classes were the most popular in the curriculum. His student imitators (and they were legion) could always get a laugh, but it was a sympathetic laugh.”

Cushwa taught, inspired and instilled a love of literature and writing. “In the 1920s,” wrote Charles Edward Wyzanski Jr. '23 (a judge with the U.S. District Court of Boston) in *Exeter Remembered*, “the Phillips Exeter Academy was the most incandescent place for a boy who was ready for the world's most stimulating teaching—the kind of fire that burned from Frank Cushwa with lightning force lit the wicks of a thousand waxen lads.”

Cushwa was a member of the committee that created the Harkness Plan. In 1933, he published his *Introduction to Conrad*, which used autobiographical passages from Conrad's works to paint a picture of Joseph Conrad as a person and a literary craftsman. In 1936, Cushwa

*(continued on page 127)*

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(continued from page 128)

co-wrote, with Exeter colleague Robert N. Cunningham, *Ways of Thinking and Writing*, a textbook of advanced composition that provides a window onto the passion for ideas and creative thought that made the Exeter experience unique. (Used copies of this textbook are still available through Amazon.com.)

“Undoubtedly,” wrote Williams in *The Story of Phillips Exeter*, “Mr. Cushwa’s great gift was that of vitality. He loved life himself and loved to see things live. His passion for shrubs and flowers was one example. With this love, however, went a lively sense of justice and a quick concern for the weak or the distressed. Almost best of all was his rich sense of humor, and his friends can still hear the hearty laugh that trumpeted the good joke.”

Williams quotes a student who described Cushwa as “a skillful and sympathetic teacher who made a difficult subject living and thrilling, and an adviser of never failing wisdom and experience, a father and a companion. Patience and a sense of humor prevented him from ever treating anyone harshly.”

Then there is the puzzle. In the late 1930s Cushwa apparently fell into a depression—though no one in those days knew to call it that. On April 30, 1939, at age 57, Cushwa took his own life at the home of relatives in Worcester, MA. As is often the case, no one ever really knew why, if there was a why, or if there ever is a why. We certainly can’t escape the irony of a person who so loved life ending his own.

While noting this mark of 100 years—and how distant it makes that era sound—we can at the same time remind ourselves that in fact it was just a

generation or two ago.

Frank Cushwa was my grandfather. His son, William T. Cushwa ’36, ’89, is my uncle Bill. His daughter, Charlotte Cushwa Clark, is my mother. Now 90, Mom remembers James Agee ’28 walking through their garden behind Gilman House.

“He was a very odd walker,” she says. “I didn’t know his name at the time, but I saw pictures later and knew it was him.” At one time my grandmother, Elizabeth Cushwa, had in her bookshelves a copy of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* that Agee had inscribed, “To Mr. Cushwa, who taught me everything I know.” It is somehow appropriate to Agee’s legendary status that the book was lost after my grandmother’s death.

None of Frank Cushwa’s 11 grandchildren—my five cousins, my five siblings and I—were born during his lifetime. So, strictly speaking, none of us knew him. But we know his hearty laugh. It was passed on and can be heard at any family gathering. Many other clear and discernible traits were passed on—among them love of learning, words and talking, a joy in aiding the development of young people, and, for some of us, alas, a tendency to girth.

We can look around and realize that Cushwa’s passion for teaching still lives and breathes at Exeter—and some of us can realize that it lives and breathes in us. ●

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