

Robert Allen Grey '71 (Hon.); P'71, P'73, P'75

Instructor in English, Emeritus

(1924–2006)

Robert Allen Grey was born in Beverly, MA, in 1924. He attended Dartmouth College from 1942 to 1943; he then served in the British Army as an ambulance driver in Burma during World War II, though, with his apparent modesty, he rarely spoke of this Hemingwayesque experience. He earned his A.B. at the University of Chicago in 1948; his M.A.T. at the Harvard Graduate School of Education in 1951.

After Chicago and Harvard, Bob taught at Scarborough School in Scarborough, NY, from 1951 to 1954. From 1954 to 1965 he taught English at Kent School, where he and Steve Kurtz '44, '46, '78, '87 (Hon.); P'77 were colleagues for some years.

Bob came to Exeter in 1966, appointed an instructor in English. He taught in the SYA Program in Barcelona from 1974 to 1975; in the spring of 1982, he was the resident director of the Washington Intern Program. With Tim Collard of Phillips Andover, he organized the Exeter/Andover South End Summer Intern Program in Boston.

In 1991, he ended his 25-year tenure at Exeter and retired to his home in Kittery Point, ME, choosing to be close to the ocean that he loved. There he walked the shore, read his books, and sailed his boat whenever he could. And there he died, in May of 2006, Andi '71 (Hon.), his wife of 56 years, at his side. True to Bob's spirit, the service held in his memory took place not in a church but on a bluff overlooking the Atlantic. Remarks at that service gave testimony to Bob as an example of a compelling polarity: on the one hand, he was an original; on the other, he was a man of his time. His life gave ample evidence of that polarity.

The Chinese adage, "May you live in interesting times" certainly applies to Bob Grey's career at Exeter. He arrived at the Academy in February of 1966, in the heart of a decade that witnessed the assassination of two brothers—one the president—and of our greatest human rights leader, tragic events central to an age of national violence. He heard the voice of Martin Luther King Jr. calling from the Birmingham jail for nonviolent, direct action; he heard the voice of President Johnson ending a speech



A member of the English Department from 1966 to 1991, Robert Allen Grey also taught in the SYA Program in Barcelona, served as a resident director of the Washington Intern Program, and helped co-found the Exeter/Andover South End Summer Intern Program in Boston.

to Congress about civil rights with the resounding words: "And we *shall* overcome." As a man of the interesting times in which he lived, Bob responded to those voices, determined that indeed we would overcome.

In her remarks at Bob's retirement, Principal Kendra Stearns O'Donnell '31, '47, '63, '91, '97 (Hon.); P'00 implicitly emphasized that determination. "He always committed himself to the necessity of linking goodness and knowledge," she said, "[and he] has ably expressed that critical dimension of the school's mission." Indeed, whether manifest in Phillips Hall or in Williams House or in the South End of Boston, Bob's commitment to the founder's most famous dictum never wavered; hundreds of Exonians still attest to that commitment.

Bob's teaching, whether in communities patently striving to link intellectual distinction with moral principle, or even in communities less intentionally charged with that mission, was always invigorated and enriched by his awareness—nowadays becoming more and more pronounced in the academic world—that thinking and feeling must be vitally integrated, and the

means of that integration must come from language. In his own life, his mingling of words in different ways, on different phases of his mind's journey, revealed his keen awareness of what impressive tension can be achieved in language.

It was not wholly accidental, nor by any means insignificant, that Bob found somewhere in the bowels of Phillips Hall, one of two early volumes of the *Dictionary of the English Language* compiled by Samuel Johnson. Bob kept that timeworn, folio-size volume on his Harkness table in Phillips 2. If his students were especially discerning, they would have known that Bob's describing Dostoevsky's chapter on "The Grand Inquisitor" as "an adumbration of totalitarianism" levied on Johnson's love of the Latin roots of our language. And so did his whimsical description of his reading habits as, at one point in his career, "desultory;" at another point "promiscuous." For Bob loved such Latinate English words, and he endeavored unstintingly to impart that love to his students. But, like Orwell, he also

loved the punch and slug of the Anglo-Saxon word, words that gave muscle to his assaults on the status quo. That love, too, he worked hard to leave with his students.

Phillips 2 was the setting for Harkness discussions of Yeats' greatest poems; discussions of *Moby-Dick*; discussions of *King Lear*. But his original mind recognized the value for the classroom of texts less commonly found on our reading lists: *Alice in Wonderland* and *Wind in the Willows*, for example. But whatever the text, Bob always insisted not merely on content, on idea, but firmly on how the language that embodies content ennobles those ideas. He was in fast agreement with Flannery O'Connor's astute observation that in great literature, "the way something is said is a part of what is being said."

Bob did not limit his teaching to the English classroom. In 1988, he introduced with stunning freshness a Senior Studies course, "The Black Experience in White America," which he taught with Russell Weatherspoon. That this course reflected many of Bob's core concerns is clear from what he wrote for the catalog: "This course draws on the resources of various disciplines—English, religion, history, music and art," and it "aims toward practical understanding of the strategies necessary to achieve racial and multicultural harmony, not only in the United States but across the world."

As passionate as Bob was about the power of literature, he was equally passionate in his dedication to the civil rights movement and in his opposition to the war in Vietnam, both of which had great urgency for him. In October of 1969, he was a leader in a community-wide protest against the war that included a silent march to the crest of Shaw's Hill. And he later extended his energies by taking a group of students to Washington to join in a nationwide protest.

But Bob did not ever neglect the wholesome routine of the Academy. He joined a number of his outstanding colleagues in coaching crew; he had become proficient in coaching rowing when he had taught at Kent. He always had interesting experiences to relate about rowing, and he perceptively noted that the head coach of crew at Exeter, Charlie Swift '31; P'58, P'60, P'64, whom some considered rather stern, was, in fact, extremely kind and remarkably patient in the manner in which he helped boys develop the skills of rowing. For his part, Bob directed his coaching to introducing Exeter girls to crew during the transitional years of coeducation. Ever the man of his time.

Bob exhibited an equally fine touch helping the boys in Williams House grow into a solid community within the community at large. If Bob taught with communicable enthusiasm, he also ran Will House by setting an example of how to develop a capacity for friendship. Among the many student friends of the Greys were some Will House alumni, including Roberto Garcia, Terry Hopkins, Dan Hunter, and Wick Sloane P'03, all of the class of 1971. Given their enduring friendships with those young men, it is no wonder that both Bob and Andi were elected honorary members of that class.

Andi was so much a part of Bob's life and the lives of their children: Lydia, Lisa '71, Priscilla '73, and Peter '75. Lydia's teenage years were spent before coeducation was instituted at the Academy, but the other Grey children graduated from the Academy. Lisa was a member of the class of 1971, the first class that included girls; who knew then that years later, her parents would

become her classmates? During that time, Iris Gowen '72; P'08, P'10 came to live with the Grey family in Will House. Here's how she remembers Bob:

"Bob's teaching career at PEA spanned some of the most turbulent times for the school and he was often at the center of the fray. Coeducation, support for anti-war activities, and racial equality were among the campaigns in which he fought for change. His own vision of social justice was so strong and pure that he was sometimes frustrated by his limitations in convincing others that social injustice demanded change.

"Bob had no patience for posturing, pretense, or politics, but he had great empathy for any student he perceived as struggling and gave of himself unsparsingly for anyone he considered oppressed or unfairly treated.

"Bob had an internal restlessness which not only drove him in his exploration of works of literature but led him to seek adventure through travel. He was particularly fond of boats and loved unconventional travel on freighters across the Atlantic, exploring the coasts of Newfoundland and voyaging across to the Azores."

In his career, Bob held various significant positions. At one point, he was chair of the John Phillips Committee, a faculty-student committee with a free-ranging agenda. At another, he was chair of the Community Support Group, working hand in hand with colleagues and close friends, among them Dolores Kendrick and Bob Thompson '72; '71, '89, '95 (Hon.); P'12. In that work Bob Grey was tireless in his efforts to increase cross-cultural understanding, including his own, and to issue a challenge to action. And at yet another point, he was secretary of the *Cum Laude* Society. It was in that capacity that Bob offered to a group of new inductees his perspective on honor and justice, concepts affirmed in the society's motto.

Some, or all, of you may not be able to hammer a nail, shoe a horse, dance a dance, or set a string of lobster pots with such finesse, but you have shown that you can manipulate numbers, words, and concepts, and write papers and examinations pretty neatly. You should feel good about this. For this we laud and honor you.

Excellent!

And, says a little voice, "So what?"

Here we are, a crowd of rather brainy people, an elite group, really, and one has to ask, "So what?" To what uses is all this intellectual experience (or energy) to be put? To entertain one another? To perpetually congratulate—or denigrate—one another? To gain worldly power (i.e., money and office)? I think you will agree that these are indeed games that the intellectual classes play. But they don't really have much to do with honor, justice and the good life, do they?

As both a man of his time and an original, Bob Grey would have been tickled if his students had called him Professor Zeitgeist. If someone in the class had registered a blank expression, Bob would have slid a dictionary across the table. We remember him for the things he stood for, and we miss his gruff, idiosyncratic, collegial presence among us, ever the authentic teacher, ever the independent citizen. ●

This Memorial Minute was written by Peter Greer '58; '71, '81, '83, '97, '00 (Hon.); P'81, P'83, P'94; Russell Weatherspoon '01, '03, '08 (Hon.); P'92, P'95, P'97, P'01; David Weber '71, '74 (Hon.); P'92; Charles Terry '28 (Hon.); P'80, P'81, chair, and was presented at faculty meeting on May 21, 2008.