

# OBITUARIES

## EDWARD CONNERY LATHEM

HANOVER, N.H. — Edward Connery Lathem, librarian, editor, and for more than five decades an administrative officer at Dartmouth College, died unexpectedly on Friday, May 15, 2009, in his Dartmouth office. He had been working at his desk in the Bryant Room in Webster Hall when he collapsed. He was 82.



Edward Lathem

Mr. Lathem was most widely known for editorial works in the fields of literature, history, and biography.

His volume *The Poetry of Robert Frost* (first published in 1969) constitutes the standard edition of the famous poet's verse. A close personal friend of Robert Frost, Mr. Lathem was also the editor or co-editor of several other Frost volumes, among them *Selected Prose of Robert Frost* (1966), *Interviews with Robert Frost* (1966), *Robert Frost: Poetry and Prose* (1972), *North of Boston Poems* (1977) and *Prose Jottings of Robert Frost* (1982).

Other of his more than 30 published books relate to such diverse figures as President Calvin Coolidge, novelists Erskine Caldwell and Wallace Stegner, historian Bernard Bailyn and graphic artist Rudolph Ruzicka, as well as to such varied subjects as landmark works of Americana, newspapers of the period 1690-1820, libraries as scholarly centers, and Dartmouth College history. (The latter category included *Miraculously Buildd in Our Hearts*, a volume on the history of Dartmouth in the 20th century, published in 1999, which he co-authored with *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* executive editor David Shribman.)

Mr. Lathem continued to publish very actively in the final years of his life. Among his recent works were *Mark Twain's Four Weeks in England — 1907*, a study of the famous author's trip to England to receive an honorary degree from Oxford near the end of his life. (2006, The Mark Twain House and Museum). Others were *England's Homage to Longfellow* (2007, Maine Historical Society), *George Bernard Shaw: Eight Interviews* (2002, The Perpetua Press), *The Beginnings of Dr. Seuss — An Informal Reminiscence*, (2004, Dartmouth College) and a bibliography, *English Verse and Literary Prose in America*

of friendship and interaction with the college's twelfth president, John Sloan Dickey, included their working collaboratively on the preparation of a volume of President Dickey's speeches and writings, published in 1977 as *The Dartmouth Experience*.

Over the course of his Dartmouth years, Mr. Lathem also fulfilled a number of ancillary roles at the college, including that of literary editor of the *Dartmouth Alumni Magazine* (in the decade 1953-63), as well as that of executive director (1980-89) of the Kenneth and Harle Montgomery Endowment, the establishment of which he had helped to coordinate during the mid-1970s.

He was the organizing force for the creation at Dartmouth of a comprehensive microfilm edition of the papers of Daniel Webster, undertaken as the basis for subsequent publication of an annotated letterpress edition, selective in its coverage, and to the projection of which he had been central. Also, it was his initiative that brought about the formation at Dartmouth of the University Press of New England, as a cooperative intercollegiate publishing enterprise.

Mr. Lathem's having in 1983 pointed out that Dartmouth's royal charter of 1769 provides for inclusion among the institution's officers of an usher, as well as a steward, caused the college's board of trustees to reinstitute both of those long-dormant posts, and he from that point onward served as college usher, functioning as such within the ceremonial pagentry of annual convocation and commencement exercises.

A native of New Hampshire, Mr. Lathem was born at Littleton on Dec. 15, 1926. He attended public schools in Longmeadow and Springfield, Mass. Then, following a brief period of duty with the U.S. Army toward the close of World War II, he entered Dartmouth, from which he was graduated with the class of 1951.

He spent the academic year 1951-52 at Columbia University, pursuing his master's degree in library service. Thereafter, during intervals of leave from Dartmouth, he engaged in research at Oxford University, which awarded him a doctorate of philosophy in 1961.

DAVID M. SHRIBMAN  
Syndicated Columnist

THE CALL CAME late at night and the tone of the voice was ominous. We had to meet. Immediately. It could not wait. It had to be the next day.

So I flew to Boston and met Edward Connery Lathem in the US Airways Club. For years we had been working together on a book that in our hearts we knew almost no one would read. That didn't matter. What mattered that morning was whether the pages of our book would have 38 lines of type or 39.

We talked about it, thought about it, looked over galley proofs, and then made the fateful decision. We went for 39. And, as Edward's friend Robert Frost put it in a different context, that has made all the difference, and not only because the extra line, spread over the length of the passage, ended up saving a page.

Once the book was out I realized something else, that Mr. Lathem has made all the difference, not only in our volume but also in my own life.

Mr. Lathem, Dean of Libraries emeritus of Dartmouth College, died Friday afternoon, having collapsed at age 82 at his desk, which of course was in a college library.

With his death came the death of a special era in American letters, for Mr. Lathem was the center of a remarkable universe that included such disparate figures as Robert Frost, Dr. Seuss, Wallace Stegner, Erskine Caldwell, Paul Sample, and members of the Calvin Coolidge family. He was involved in more than 100 literary projects. He advised bank presidents, college presidents and newspaper editors, including L.L. Winship of *The Boston Globe*.

Of course, one of the newspaper editors he advised was me, because it is not too much to say that while I, like Mr. Lathem, took my degree from Dartmouth, in truth I got my education from Mr. Lathem.

Here are some of the lessons he imparted: There is a difference between an introduction and a preface. It is essential to assure that there is just the right space between the dots in an ellipsis, and there should be four dots if the ellipsis ends a paragraph. It is best to regard "washtubs" as a single word, not as two.

All that plus one more: The person who worries about getting the many small things right invariably gets the few big things right.

In an Internet era, Edward Connery Lathem wrote letters. In an era of word processors, Edward used a fountain pen. In an era of bytes, Edward cherished nibs. In an era of extravagance, Edward was frugal. In an era of excess, Edward was a minimalist. In an era of informality, Edward always wore a bespoke suit and a white tie. He was a man of steady habits, and one of those habits was me. It was the greatest gift he could have bestowed.

That gift is what sealed the friendship of Robert Frost and Edward Connery Lathem. Mr. Lathem eventually



PHOTO COURTESY OF DARTMOUTH COLLEGE

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became Frost's editor, and Frost was the best man at Mr. Lathem's wedding in 1957. Each time Frost visited, he would put a small inscription in one of the volumes of Frost poems, perhaps *North of Boston* or *A Boy's Will*, that rested comfortably on the shelves in the Lathem home on North Balch Street in Hanover. Before long, those volumes would be full of scratchings, signed R.F., that provided commentary and insights on the poems.

On the contents page of a first-edition copy of *A Boy's Will*, for example, Frost wrote in handwriting that is almost illegible: "All the poems in this body were written in New Hampshire and Massachusetts. I wrote the descriptions of the poems to make the poems look more connected than they were. R.F." At the bottom of the poem *Storm Fear*, Frost wrote the word "Derry,"

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# OPINION

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## A FOND GOODBYE TO A METICULOUS EDITOR

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indicating the New Hampshire town where the poem was set.

The result of their remarkable friendship is very likely on your own shelf, a volume called *The Poetry of Robert Frost*. Every English major and serious reader of a certain age, perhaps of any age, cherishes this volume, edited by Edward Connery Lathem.

Frost chose a meticulous editor, as I found each time I embarked on a book project with Edward. The pattern was always the same: I would write like mad, but carefully, as if an 80-year-old man who revered the English language were sitting on my shoulder and watching, disapprovingly, as each word came forth. Then Edward would send back a note saying that the work was fine, no it was absolutely terrific, in fact it was perfect in every way, though would I mind terribly if he made the following changes?

He then would list about 15 suggestions for each page and write something like this, from a letter in January 2006 on a book project we were doing on Frost himself: "Why you tolerate, say nothing of why you would in fact ask for, my mucking about in what you have composed, I know not!" He knew perfectly well why. He was perhaps the greatest editor of English prose alive.

On another occasion, he took what I thought was an adequate passage of about 10,000 words for a book on Mark Twain and began his critique this way:

"The double-spread pages now hereto attached will show pretty comprehensively where and how I have thus far undertaken, at your behest, to suggest textual revision," he began, knowing full well that there had not been such a request from me. "They don't indicate the specific reasons I have proposed emendation for your consideration — which sometimes involves possibly preferable word choice or manner of phrasing, sometimes a correction of fact, sometimes a new element perhaps to be incorporated, sometimes an extension of quoted matter, and not infrequently the tucking in for a quotation either a specific or generalized (but scholarly adequate) source indication (so that we don't have to deal with footnotes or, alternatively, with the appended notes section)."

No one writes, or thinks, this way anymore. No one cares this much anymore. Indeed, almost no one knows this much anymore. Mr. Lathem's mind was a search engine before the term existed, and if he had an e-mail address, which he pointedly did not, it might have been: [roadnottaken@frost.org](mailto:roadnottaken@frost.org).

Indeed, if you dared write Mr. Lathem an e-mail, you would have to wait until the next Tuesday, when his secretary came in, to have any chance of getting a response, and if he did respond, he would tuck a letter in an envelope, affix a stamp on it, and walk down to the Post Office himself.

I have hundreds of those letters, most of which conclude: Please destroy this letter. It was the only request he ever made that I did not follow.