

# Classica Americana

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*This series treats in very brief form the lives and achievements of America's greatest classicists. Each column is written by a scholar who has known the subject personally, has done previous biographical work on the subject, or is expert in the subject's field. Along with biographical data and a review of the subject's career, there is a special emphasis on his or her role as a teacher, in an effort to contribute to the modern debate on classical pedagogy the thought and examples of the past, which may be in danger of being forgotten. Inquiries may be addressed to the editor of this column, Prof. Ward W. Briggs, Jr., Dept. of French and Classics, Univ. of South Carolina, Columbia SC 29208; e-mail wardbriggs@sc.edu.*

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## Frederic Melvin Wheelock (1902–1987)

2002 marked the centenary of one of the most influential and least known figures in American classical studies. Having failed to get tenure after 14 years at one institution, he had left Classics behind for the business world, and, at an age when most would be planning retirement, he published the fruits of his long teaching career as a text that would sell over a million copies and dominate college-level Latin instruction for half a century.

A long line of New England educators began with Ralph Wheelock (1600–1683), a Puritan divine who came to America in 1637, became a schoolmaster, and raised funds for the newly founded Harvard College. His great-grandson Eleazar Wheelock (1711–1779) was awarded the charter to found Dartmouth College. Franklin Major Wheelock (1871–1958) managed a mill for the Ralston Company and was instrumental in the hybridization of seeds, particularly butternut squash. The family of his wife, Etta Robinson Goldthwaite (1873–1938), a dressmaker, has been in America even longer, dating from Thomas Goldthwaite (1608–1683), a cooper, who emigrated to America with Governor John Winthrop (1606–1676) in 1630. Etta's father, William Goldthwaite (1845–1924), a teacher of Latin and algebra in New York and New Hampshire for 30 years, was the chief role model for his grandson, Frederic Melvin Wheelock, born 19 September 1902 in Lawrence, Massachusetts.

The heir of these rich and ancient bloodlines received the finest education New England could provide: after elementary schooling in Lawrence and Oswego, New York, he graduated from Phillips Andover in 1921 and *cum laude* from Harvard in the famous class of 1925 that produced Sterling Dow (1903–1995), John Huston Finley, Jr. (1904–1995), and Mason Hammond (1903–2002). Wheelock received the AM in 1926 and became an Instructor in Classics at Haverford.

As the country entered the Depression in 1929, Wheelock

was obliged for his future security to work toward the PhD. The medievalist E.K. Rand (1871–1945) was developing his own pioneering American interest in the Virgilian tradition into a project to produce an *editio maior* of Servius. Rand encouraged a number of his students, like J.P. Elder (1913–1985), Bernard Mann Peebles (1906–1976), the Irishman John Savage (1883–1973), Arthur F. Stocker (1914–), Howard Taylor Smith, and George Byron Waldrop, to write dissertations on Virgilian biography and commentary.

In a dispute with R.S. Conway (1864–1933) over a statement in the life of Virgil attributed to Marcus Valerius Probus (late first century CE) that Virgil's birthplace, the village of Andes, lay "milia passuum XXX" from Mantua (Conway supported the majority of Probus' sources, while Rand supported Egnatius' reading, "milia passuum III"), Rand determined that a thorough examination of the manuscript tradition of Probus was needed. Wheelock took on the project and methodically collated all the Probian manuscripts and editions of the *Life* and the *Commentaries*. Careful examination and comparison of the manuscripts, as well as their quotations from Cicero and Greek authors, led Wheelock to conclude, against the prevailing opinion, that the manuscript of Egnatius proved to be a "faithful transmitter of a manuscript source superior to that from which other witnesses to the text are derived." His painstaking dissertation, *De Probi Commentariorum Vergilianorum Textu Recensendo*, comprising over 75 pages written in technical Latin, also answered Rand's question of the distance from Andes to Mantua: the abbreviation ∞ ∞ ∞, meaning "three miles," was sometimes confused with XXX. Egnatius was correct again.

After receiving the PhD in 1933, Wheelock used a Corey



Frederic Melvin Wheelock, Harvard University,  
1925

Traveling Fellowship from Harvard (1933–1934) to study at libraries in Paris, Munich, and Rome, where he met Meyer Reinhold (1909–2002), who had recently received his PhD from Columbia and was a fellow at the American Academy in Rome. In describing the growth of their friendship over 50 years, Reinhold said,

It was his personality that drew me; he was a genial, quiet person . . . I found I could depend on him. He was very obvious, determined, and what he said he meant. This was not true of most people in the Academy . . . He and I found something in common, we could walk together and talk together and we traveled together.

Reinhold and Wheelock visited Sicily, Malta, North Africa, Egypt, and finally Greece. Without either of them knowing it, a long personal and professional relationship had begun.

When Wheelock returned to America in 1934, he published an English version of his dissertation as “The Manuscript Tradition of Probus,” in *HSCP* 46 (1935): 85–153. On the basis of this article, Colin Hardie, in his *Vitae Vergilianae Antiquae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press [1966]: vi), stated that though many considered the Probian life too inferior to include, Wheelock’s “accurate recording” of the variants, his persuasive arguments on behalf of Egnatius’ readings, and the lack of an existing authoritative text led him to include a text that contains all of Wheelock’s suggested readings.

An instructorship in Classics in 1935 at the College of the City of New York (now part of the City University of New York) gave Wheelock enough financial security by 1937 to marry Dorothy E. Rathbone (1909–1990). Their 50-year marriage produced two daughters, Martha (1941–) and Deborah (1945–), and two grandchildren.

In 1938 Wheelock and Reinhold were both appointed Instructors in Classics at Brooklyn College (now also part of CUNY), attracted by its high reputation for teaching Classics. Unlike today, Instructor was the common entry level for faculty with the PhD who had yet to publish.

Not untypical of the time was Wheelock’s early decision to devote himself to teaching rather than to publication. His Harvard contemporaries Alston Hurd Chase (1906–1994) and Henry Phillips, Jr. (1903–1990) devoted their careers to Exeter and Andover. Two other Rand students, Smith and Waldrop, taught respectively at Milton Academy in Milton, Massachusetts, and Shadyside Academy in Pittsburgh. Of his 1925 classmates, Finley and Dow are more noted for their teaching than for original contributions to learning, and Hammond wrote more books aimed at students than at scholars.

Wheelock felt at home in a teaching department; as Reinhold said in 1952, “He has special talents as a moralist, and considers it the duty of the teacher to impart not only subject matter but also values and standards of character.” The teaching load was five courses per semester and Wheelock taught not only Latin but courses in classical civilization and etymology. Somehow he found time for committee work. Reinhold wrote, “To be on a committee with Fred Wheelock is to know that the problems at hand will be thoroughly studied in advance and that he will contribute

tirelessly to the solution of the problems.” Though there was not the modern pressure to publish, research was crucial to advancement and substantial publication beyond the dissertation was necessary for promotion to Assistant Professor. Thus in 1941 Wheelock published his second (and last) scholarly article, “Leto’s Hand and Tasso’s Horace,” *HSCP* 52 (1941): 99–123, arguing that Pomponius Leto did not annotate Tasso’s 1483 edition of Horace.

The changing student body placed more various demands on teachers of Classics than before World War II, when most college students received basic training in Latin (and a few in Greek) in secondary school. After the war, American colleges were faced with vast numbers of young veterans taking advantage of the GI bill to get a college degree, often without the benefit of college preparatory coursework. In addition to those who were demanding Classics-in-translation courses, larger numbers than ever were coming to Latin and Greek for the first time in college, and then taking only a year or two of either. Wheelock recognized that the new audience for Latin comprised “Romance language majors, English majors, and students who have been convinced of the cultural and the practical value of even a little Latin.” By the 1960s, declining enrollments in high-school Latin courses meant that even more students needed elementary instruction.

As graduate students in the 1930s, Wheelock and Phillips had become familiar with the dry-as-dust *Latin Fundamentals for College Students* by Ernest Leopold Hettich (b. 1897) published by Prentice-Hall in 1929, with a third edition revised by Albert George Conway Maitland (1900–1958) in 1934. The emphasis was on reading “made” Latin (Latin written by the authors of the book) and translating English into Latin. For his part, Henry Phillips had long felt that students needed to read real Greek, when his mentor, Carl Newell Jackson (1875–1946), presented him and Chase with the outline of a Greek textbook that Jackson would not be able to complete. The two men adapted Jackson’s outline, Chase providing grammar lessons that presented *-mi* verbs early to enable students to read the original Greek presented in Phillips’ sentences. The result was *A New Introduction to Greek* (1946).

Around the time of the positive reception of “Chase and Phillips,” Wheelock began mimeographing his own grammatical lessons and sentences drawn from ancient authors for use in the beginning Latin classes at Brooklyn College. Wheelock knew that his post-war students could handle complex grammar more readily than younger students, and were best served not by two or three years of drill and composition but by encountering actual Latin literature as soon as possible. He also kept in mind the needs of the emerging correspondence courses for self-teaching texts.

In 1950, Wheelock took his family (and his well-tested mimeographed Latin lessons) on a six-month sabbatical to San Miguel de Allende in Mexico. In preparation, he had taught himself Spanish from E.V. Greenfield’s *Spanish Grammar* in Barnes and Noble’s College Outline Series, a series of self-teachers for adults. Once in Mexico he revised and polished his chapters and readings, then surrendered the manuscript to his wife, who carefully read (and helped

clarify) it before she typed the final version.

After Wheelock's return to Brooklyn, a "new" college text appeared in 1951, *An Introduction to Latin*, by Eugene Wesley Miller. It was some relief from the bare bones of Hettich, but its readings consisted almost entirely of "made" Latin passages describing the journey of the Argonauts. It was past time for Wheelock to publish his work, but there were detours in the road ahead.

Though one could be tenured three years after being promoted to Assistant Professor, the military service of younger faculty and the doubtful economic conditions of wartime made probationary periods much more variable than they are today. Wheelock was promoted in 1947 (at the age of 45) to Assistant Professor, in the same year that the department hired Reinhold's old friend, the papyrologist Naphtali Lewis (1911–), at the same rank, and brought in Ethyle Wolfe (1919–) as Instructor. Reinhold had been promoted two years earlier and received tenure in 1952. Lewis and Wheelock were due to be considered for tenure the next year. Everyone in the department thought Wheelock a friend and admired his work as a teacher, but even his closest colleagues realized that by any objective judgment he had not published significantly beyond his dissertation. In addition, Wheelock had, over the years, felt increasingly out of place among the urban New Yorkers like Reinhold, Lewis, and the chairman, Joseph Pearl (1885–1974). In addition, Brooklyn College had long been known for its left-wing politics, with which Wheelock had little sympathy, despite his deep loyalty to and admiration for the professionalism of his colleagues.

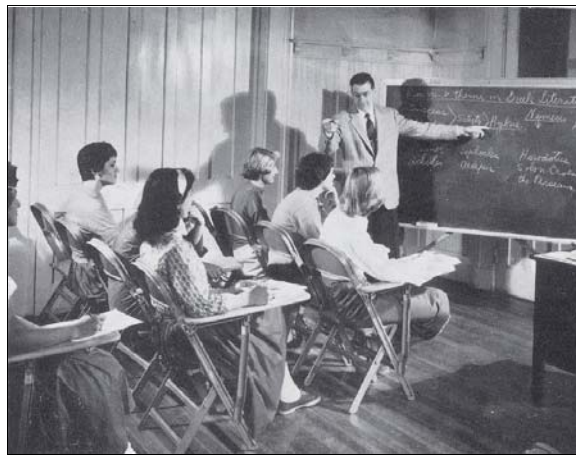
At the conclusion of the fall semester 1952, before he could be denied tenure, he resigned his position, determined to leave the profession for good. Each member of the department signed a testimonial expressing thanks and regret at his decision, for "his untiring efforts and sober judgment have been a source of strength to the Department of Classical Languages and to the continued vitality of the humanities at Brooklyn College." By March 1953, he had moved his family to Cazenovia, New York, 19 miles southeast of Syracuse, where the family operated a bed-and-breakfast with gift shop on Route 20. Within two years, the New York State Thruway had diverted traffic around Cazenovia, and Wheelock was obliged to go into business with a friend selling insurance. As his business dwindled, and as Wheelock passed the age of 50, he realized that the world of business was clearly not his *métier*. He was greatly relieved to be named Professor of Humanities at Cazenovia Junior College in 1954, but there was not enough Latin to teach, and he was consequently obliged to create a "Great Books" course, which he described in *Junior College Journal* 27 (October 1956): 109–10. The manuscript of his Latin text

had been languishing since the return from Mexico and his attempts to find a publisher. Did he remember his happy experience learning Spanish from Greenfield's College Outline Series? His submission to Barnes and Noble was successful and after 12 years of classroom use and constant revision, his book, simply titled *Latin*, appeared in 1956 as number 104 in the *College Outline Series* text.

Though the book would have five revisions in the next 50 years, we can see in this first edition the extraordinary qualities that have made it endure. Chief of these is its remarkable ability both to teach sufficient grammar to equip the student who will go on to advanced Latin classes and at the same time to offer a self-contained experience, what Wheelock called "the pleasure and profit," the "sense of progress and literary achievement" to the student taking only one year to fulfill a requirement. Beyond that, the lessons as presented do not rely on a particular method or personality to be successful. Wheelock allows each teacher to present

the material by whatever means comfortable, unlike some moderns who rely on the personality of their presentation (one thinks of Peter Jones' *Learn Latin* or of the Humez Brothers' *Latina pro Populo*). With so much emphasis on grammar, the text was light on two staples of previous elementary Latin instruction—vocabulary and composition exercises. In diminishing the amount of Latin composition, Wheelock was following an anti-British tradition that characterized the Latin training of the German Neohumanists and Americans as far back as Gilderleeve.

The book's 40 "chapters" (not "lessons" as in many high-school texts), typically covered three-quarters of the school year. Chapters were divided into sections presenting forms, grammar, and vocabulary (separating "active" and "recognition" vocabulary was the least successful of Wheelock's innovations) with "exercises," sentences to translate predominantly from Latin to English, followed by etymological notes. The core of each chapter was its *Sententiae Antiquae* section, sentences taken wholly or with slight revision from the ancient authors. In the back of the book were 29 passages of *Loci Antiqui*, from Catullus to Caesar of Heisterbach (approximately one-third were from Cicero). The traditional numbering and presentation of the conjugations and declensions were maintained, though some methodologists were beginning to advocate presentation based on frequency. Wheelock used traditional terms like "jussive noun clause" (not the more modern "indirect command") and "passive periphrastic." He did not give the future imperative or the supine and he postponed the introduction of the imperfect to chapter 15 (after the perfect system) because of its varied meanings, though most books gave it early because of its regular formation. Some of the sentences were inevitably



Frederic Melvin Wheelock, Cazenovia Junior College, 1956

politically incorrect by today's standards, "Gloria puellarum erat et est et semper erit forma" (Ch. 6) and "Varium et mutabile semper femina" (Ch. 16). Nevertheless, Wheelock's approach to teaching Latin, as he told an interviewer for *Contemporary Authors*, is everywhere present: "I have always stressed the need for a humanistic emphasis in teaching Latin, presenting it as learning for living. It was this ideal which . . . made it different from other such books." Reviews were positive and sales were respectable.

Wheelock was promoted to Dean at Cazenovia in 1957, removing him again from the classroom. Eager to leave the tourist house his family rattled around in, far from town and a social life, and longing to return to teaching Latin full time, he secured a position in July 1958 as Latin Master at the Darrow School, then a private boys' school on the site of a Shaker village in New Lebanon, New York, in the Southern Berkshires, 26 miles east of Albany. Given a house to live in and a living allowance, the family felt more secure than they had in years and Wheelock felt closer physically and professionally to the spirit of his grandfather Goldthwaite. At Darrow he saw the first edition of *Latin* through some corrected printings, then produced a revised version.

In 1960 came a second edition of the book now called *Latin: An Introductory Course Based on Ancient Authors*. He added 35 pages of *Loci Immutati*, 56 unaltered original passages in prose and verse arranged chronologically from Catullus to Martial. The help needed to get through the passages was often cumbrous, one reviewer noting that the selection from Cicero's *First Catilinarian* had 185 notes in six pages. Nevertheless, the inclusion of *Loci Immutati* furthered Wheelock's goal of presenting the Latin literary heritage along with the language.

In 1960 he returned to college teaching. With one daughter in college, he accepted a position as Associate Professor at the University of Toledo (1960–1964). There, at the suggestion of an editor, he produced the third edition of his book in 1963, adding the crucial section of "Self-Tutorial Exercises," essentially extensive tests on the forms and grammar, followed by 15–20 Latin sentences for translation. Another section of "Keys" gave the correct answers to the questions in the exercises. The book gradually came to displace those of Hettich and Miller, and even the high-school texts used in some colleges. With the addition of the "Exercises" and the increasing popularity of the book on college campuses, sales began to soar. The first three editions sold 757,000 copies from 1956 to 1987. Wheelock was promoted to Professor of Classics in 1964. As Chase and Phillips had produced a reader for their course, so in response to demand, Wheelock produced *Latin Literature: A Book of Readings* (Barnes and Noble, 1967), "not a survey of all Latin literature, but a sound, interesting, and stimulating reading experience in genuine Latin literature." Wheelock eschewed a collection of short gobbetts from many authors, choosing instead to present longer passages (mostly from Cicero and Livy) to avoid the difficulties of moving from one author's style to another and to give the student a thorough acquaintance with the authors read. The reader enjoyed no success comparable to his introductory

text.

Wheelock retired in 1968, and spent 1969–1970 as a Visiting Professor at Eckert College in St. Petersburg, Florida. He then moved to Amherst, New Hampshire, and later to Kent, Connecticut, where he indulged his passions for gardening, fishing, hiking, camping, conversing, "keeping up with the times" and "do-it-yourself challenges." By virtue of his reputation as one of the leading authorities on Latin education, Twayne published in 1974 *Quintilian as Educator: Selections from the Institutio Oratoria of Marcus Fabius Quintilianus*. The book comprised selections from the Loeb Quintilian of H.E. Butler, with an introduction and notes dominated by Wheelock's sour view of modern "educationalists."

On 29 October 1987 Wheelock died in Sharon, Connecticut, of a heart attack.

HarperCollins acquired the rights in 1988 and, after an editorial miscue with the fourth edition in the early 1990s, wisely hired Richard LaFleur to bring it up to date where necessary in a revised fifth edition (1995). The supine is now given and politically incorrect sentences have been deleted or revised, though one wonders what Wheelock's Puritan ancestors would think of the inclusion of "Claudius' Excremental Expiration" in Chapter 34! Now in its sixth edition, the book averages sales of 30,000 copies per year. HarperCollins has sold over 250,000 copies. Added to the figures from Barnes and Noble, Wheelock's text has sold over one million copies. The reader (also revised by LaFleur, 2001) and workbook (by LaFleur and Paul T. Comeau, third ed., 2000) are now more popular than ever and maintain Wheelock's unflinching dedication to the value of even a year's worth of Latin. That dedication led Wheelock to introduce Latin to more Americans than any man in history. Where would we be without him?

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