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DEDICATION  
OCTOBER 24 · 1965

*Robert Frost*

*Speaks*

*Departmentally*

ON JANUARY FOURTEENTH, 1935 Robert Frost posted a letter from Key West to George Frisbee Whicher in Amherst. "The enclosed," he commenced, "went across my mind the other night like a cloud across the moon. There is nothing appropriate in it to anything down here – nothing particularly appropriate. The events recorded in it took place down here. But they might just as well have taken place in New England. Ants seem to be ants pretty much everywhere. Their characteristics are called forth by sugar on a table cloth equally north and south. If I could not by force or cunning wrest my poem to fit where I am cast away by the doctor on this 50 percent deserted island the question was how was I going to bring it in between me and anybody else. It

wouldn't satisfy the requirements merely to print it in a magazine appropos of nothing. In my desperation casting about, I caught at the last word of the last line to connect it with you trying to be even feebly departmental with English at our Amherst College."

The letter continues, concludes, is signed and dated. Then a final note is added directly above the salutation: "At last moment departmental ditty withheld for emendation under national rehabilitation act and something else substituted." Something else, in the form of a six page leaflet, was an early draft of "A Serious Step Lightly Taken" which, radically altered, was to appear in *A Witness Tree* (1942).

The next letter, written on January 23rd, brought the promised "Departmental," composed, as the previous poem had been, in the form of a leaflet. "Take my word for it

Departmental  
by  
R. F.

Departmental

An ant on the table cloth  
Ran into a stupefied moth  
A thousand times his size.  
He showed not the least surprise.  
His business wasn't with such.  
He gave it scarcely a touch  
And was off on his duty run.  
But if he encountered one  
Of the hive's enquiry squad,  
Whose work is to find out God  
And the nature of time and space,  
He would put him onto the case.  
Ants are a curious race.  
One crossing with hurried tread  
The body of one of their dead  
Isn't given a moment's arrest -  
Seems not even impressed.  
But he no doubt reports to any  
With whom he crosses antennae;  
And they no doubt report

To the higher up at Court.  
Then word goes forth in Formic  
"Death's come to Jerry Mc Bonnie  
(This is the height of fame  
When executives know our name)  
Our selfless forager Jerry.  
With the special machinery  
Whose office it is to bury  
The dead of the Communist  
So bring him home to his people.  
Lay him in state on a sepul  
Wrapped for shroud in a petal.  
Embalmer him with tcher of natter."  
This is the word of your Queen."  
And presently on the scene  
Appears a solemn mortician,  
And taking formal position  
With fingers calmly a-twiddle,  
Seizes the dead by the middle,  
And heaving him high in air,  
Barries him out of there.  
No one stands round to stare.  
It's nobody's else affair.  
It couldn't be called ungente.  
Is it now frightfully departmental?

and the internal evidence," wrote Robert Frost, "my Ant is not a Stinging Ant. He is merely an amusing little piece of nature faking so bare faced that I found I was ashamed of it — was and still am. But after having piqued your suspicions as I evidently have (though unintentionally) I can see that I owe it to you to let you satisfy yourself that it was my scientific and artistic scruples that led me to quash my Ant work and nothing personal about you and departments."

"Departmental" appeared first in the December 1935 issue of the *Yale Review*. Meanwhile a number of further "emendations" had been made, among them the excision of two lines. Still another, affecting the final line, occurred prior to the poem's next appearance, in *A Further Range* (1936). A letter of January 22, 1936 to Louis Untermeyer provides a background for this revision.

"But I must write a small letter to put you out of any anxiety you may have given yourself by finding fault with 'frightfully.' To tell you the truth I thought that word was part of the joke—just like 'mortician' and 'out of there' . . ." This to the contrary, thereafter "frightfully" yielded place to "thoroughly."

The holograph which has been reproduced and the first two letters which have been quoted here, are in the Amherst College Library collections, a portion of Mrs. George Frisbee Whicher's gift of the letters from Robert Frost to her husband made in his memory.



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This keepsake celebrating the dedication of the Robert Frost Library has been printed at The Spiral Press, New York; the facsimile of Mr. Frost's letter at the Meriden Gravure Company.