

The College Motto

If a university institution is in need of some Latin from the Middle Ages for a motto, it could do worse than the words of Lupus of Ferrières (c. 805-862) in his letter to Einhard: *propter se ipsam appetenda sapientia* ('knowledge should be sought for its own sake'). Everyone in a university can and should identify with these words, whether first, best, second best, or whatever.

Nobody, to my knowledge, has come up with an incontestable interpretation of the college motto *Vel Primus Vel Cum Primis*. There is something almost oracular about its elusiveness. Nor has there been a proper analysis of the Latin. The motto is in Latin and we should not play fast and loose with the Latin to try to make it mean what we want it to mean. If we want to keep the motto we should accept that it says what it says. If we don't want to be associated with what it meant originally (and possibly still means for some), we might perhaps think of replacing it. It is not set in stone, not metaphorically anyway — it is set in stone literally, of course. The latter could be preserved as a historical curio for future members of the college and visitors. ('Yes, it has an interesting history. People think it's the college motto, but it's not. Actually it's to do with the person the college was named after. We don't exactly know why, except that he was a bishop of Durham. The college's motto is ...') And the fact that it has to do with an eponymous fourteenth-century (male, Christian) bishop, who has no connection with the college other than by homonymy, does not mean that it should be the motto of the college in perpetuity. The motto does not even refer to the college itself (see later).

Whatever the origin of the motto, and the reasons for its adoption by David Melville — and ignoring the current popular, no doubt well-meaning, (mis)interpretation of it — what does it say, what did it mean, what does/should it mean for us today? Should we understand it as a description of a (type of) person (assuming that it refers to persons, the most likely interpretation), or as the expression of an aspiration of a (type of) person, or as an injunction on a (type of) person?

First, some observations about the Latin of the motto. Morphologically, the words *primus* (singular) and *primis* (plural) may denote persons or things; the Latin is not explicit in this respect, which is no doubt why some people mistakenly suppose that the motto can be taken to refer to the college itself. Both words are forms of an adjective, but can denote persons (or things) without the presence of nouns. (Compare, for example, 'the great and the good' in English.) Literally, the motto says 'either first or with the first'. *This is all that it says*. Latin has no definite or indefinite article, so *primus* can mean 'the first' or 'a first'; *primis* can only realistically mean 'the first' here. The Latin does not give any indication of what the subject is (to be) first in or at. Note also that there is no verb. Presumably, one is to understand a form of the Latin verb 'to be', but whether indicative (the form used for making statements) or imperative or subjunctive (for commands) is unclear; usually it is indicative when it is a form of the verb 'to be' that is omitted. In classical Latin the use of *vel ... vel ...* ('either ... or ...'), as opposed to the alternative

disjunctives *aut ... aut...* can indicate that the terms are not absolute or exhaustive, i.e. it is not a case of one or the other, but allows of other possibilities. You can see then from the ambiguity of the Latin (and Latin is not noted for ambiguity) what scope there is for interpretation of its meaning. *But any interpretation must conform to what is allowed by the Latin.*

The Hatfield College crest is made up of an image of the shield or coat-of-arms of Thomas Hatfield and the college motto. There have been four versions of the crest since the college was founded by David Melville in 1846, all but one of them featuring the college motto. We know where the image of the shield/coat-of-arms comes from, and that it is possibly about 700 years old. But where does the motto come from and what is its connection, if any, with Thomas Hatfield? And what exactly does it mean? It certainly does not say or mean 'Be the best you can be'. The slightly different ways in which the Latin can be translated into English suggest different meanings, and the ambiguity cannot be resolved even if we think that we know the original source of the motto. The exhortation 'be the best you can be' could well be directed at any attempt to convey its 'real' meaning. It is more like an ancient Greek oracle than a motto.

As for the origin of the motto and what it meant originally, in fact the motto may not have been a motto as such of Thomas Hatfield himself, and it may not have appeared on his shield or on anything belonging to him. But the words of the motto can definitely be connected with him and may actually have been used by him or himself. There exists a medieval document of uncertain age known as *Historiae Dunelmensis Scriptores Tres* ('Three Writers of the History of Durham') and usually referred to as the *Continuation of the History of Durham*. In it there is a description of Thomas Hatfield which says of him (translated from the Latin, except for the crucial words) 'His sense of grandeur was such that in meetings of the noble and powerful he always strove to be *vel primus vel cum primis*'. (On the foregoing account, see the book edited by Anthony Bash and available from the Hatfield Trust, *Thomas Hatfield: Bishop, Soldier, and Politician*.) As used of Thomas Hatfield then, the words seem to mean that he always strove to be an outright first in social rank or a person of equal rank with others of the highest rank. (The words *cum primis* could also mean a person of lesser rank but closely associated with those of the highest rank. From what we know of Hatfield it is unlikely that this is what the words meant for him.) Melville must have been aware, or made aware, of this ascription and decided to use it as a motto for his college named after Hatfield. The elitist cachet of the motto does not accord perhaps with the egalitarian leanings of Melville that inspired him to create a college for needier students, or so we are told. 'Needier' is a relative term of course, in this instance needier than the gentlemen who attended the only other college, Melville's old college as it happens, some of whom at least were expected to be attended by their servants in their rooms in the castle. I suppose his new college was an improvement on this arrangement.

Incidentally, Hatfield did not attend university himself, nor did he have any obvious interest in learning or scholarship. However, he did make a substantial financial contribution to the foundation of Trinity College, Oxford, which in an

earlier form had connections with the monastery attached to the cathedral at Durham. If he had founded a college himself he would surely have given it his own name, so highly did he regard himself, with some justification perhaps as the bishop of a palatinate that extended from the Tweed to the Tees.

So we know, or think we know, what the words meant to Thomas Hatfield: an habitual, self-imposed drive to outdo others. Surely that is not what we would want them to mean for us, as members of an association of colleagues, i.e. a college, not as a collection of go-getting, self-serving competitive individuals? But the motto says what it says, and it says that an individual (male) is/aims to be/is to be a *primus* or a *cum primis*. 'Be the best you can be', seems rather evasive to me (perhaps to conceal or tone down the elitism of the literal meaning of the motto?). After all, the best you can be may fall short of your being either a *primus* or a *cum primis*, whatever we take those adjectives to denote. As for *primus*, there is plenty of scope for its application to members of the college, given what seems to be the present-day ethos of the college. You have only to look at the number of pages in previous (but still recent) issues of the *Hatfield Record* given over to firsts in this, that and the other, not to say to competitiveness in general. It seems that you can be a *primus* in just about anything and everything. Obviously the motto is working, or things are so arranged as to make it appear that it is. A person in Hatfield today can count himself/herself very unlucky not to be acknowledged as a *primus* (or *cum primis*) in something. So the motto may be taken to describe the achievements of a (supposedly) typical member, or express the aspiration of a (supposedly) typical member (neither of them necessarily truthfully), or it may be thought of as the college's injunction on its members. Accordingly, college members get/aim at/are to get a First or 2:1, a sporting or other trophy, or at least come runner-up, headship or deputy-headship of a student body etc. All very bracing and inspiring, not to say competitive and elitist, what? One wonders though what those who don't even make it into the ranks of the runners-up think of it all, if there are any such people. And surely (one hopes) there are some contrarians and dissenters who want nothing to do with this middle-class scrambling (or strolling) to the top. It's all very different from my day. In my day ...

What the Latin of the motto *cannot* refer to — the very thing it should refer to, surely — is the college itself, *pace* Tim Burt in the 2017 *Record* (and Melville will have been well aware of this). The morphology of the Latin precludes this. If Melville had wanted to adapt it rather than adopt it — he did not in fact adapt it, he simply appropriated it as it was — to denote the college, rather than a typical member of the college, the word *primus* would have become *primum*, assuming that the noun to be understood was *collegium*. (It was called 'Hatfield *Half*' initially (some Oxbridge colleges were/are known as 'halls'). But the morphology of *primus* is not consistent with *aula* or *aedes* or *domus* either, the possible Latin words for a hall.) And, to be pedantic, in Melville's day there was only one other college in Durham, the other place, so unless he had in mind colleges outside Durham or other future colleges in Durham (either of which is conceivable), the plural *primis* would have to be changed to the singular *primo*. Would Melville, even though he had been a member of the other place, have wanted to proclaim its superiority in the

motto of his new college? I think not. No, *primus* simply cannot be taken to refer to *the college itself*. If he thought about it at all, he must have had in mind a typical member of the college who was to be the/a first in things or take his place along with the first in things. Actually, I don't think that Melville thought about the applicability of the motto very much, beyond the fact that the college was called Hatfield, that it was named after Thomas Hatfield, and that there was a nice-sounding jingle associated with him that would do nicely as a motto whatever the import of the message it bore (of a kind much less objected to in 1846 anyway).

The motto is rather similar to that of St Andrews University, a place the demographic and general ethos of which are not dissimilar to those of Durham (though, like York, it has a strange idea of what a college is), whatever 'The Durham Difference'. It seems to be the university to go to these days — for those who can't get into Durham and can afford to travel that bit further from London. This motto is in Homeric Greek and is actually a line from the *Iliad* of Homer (11.784). Translated (pleonastically, if not tautologically, as in the original) it means 'always be the best and be superior to others'. (Actually, 'be the best' can also be translated as 'display (your) excellence'.) It was enjoined on Achilles by his father, Peleus. It is often taken to encapsulate the heroic code of behaviour that informs the poem — the code of a social elite, of course. (Have we not moved on in nearly three thousand years?) Note that only coming *first* is acceptable, unlike the college motto, which can be taken to countenance secondary success (a contradiction in terms according to the heroic code, though dying valiantly at the hands of a worthy adversary was not regarded as shameful).

Personally, I don't care for the exclusivity of the motto, which there is surely no getting away from however obfuscatory we may attempt to be, and I would prefer something more inclusive befitting a college. The insistence on being first grates and perhaps does not always inspire those who are not high-flyers, if there are any such people at Hatfield. I wouldn't mind if the college did away with the motto (words used originally of a medieval male social climber — and look at how high he had to climb to get to his throne in the cathedral) and came up with another one, of its own devising, And a rebus, e.g. a mortarboard on a green expanse, instead of the coat-of-arms? If you prefer to retain Latin for the motto, how about *PER PORTAS APERTAS* (and see what Tim Burt has to say about the open door image on p. 37 of the 2017 *Record*). At least it refers to the college; and it is impeccable in its political correctness. (As for gates, do miscreants still get gated, I wonder. Are there any miscreants anymore? Are they all too busy aiming to be the first — at Hatfield and beyond? In my day ...)

Jerome Moran (1963)