



Reg Murphy

THE McGILL LECTURE

Reg Murphy
President and Publisher
The Baltimore Sun

It was on a winter's night twenty years ago now that my phone rang with the dreadful news. Without preamble, Jack Tarver said, "McGill's dead. You go to the paper. I'd better get out to his house."

So I went to the *Atlanta Constitution* to join the grey-faced men and women who were our colleagues. My job as the editor: Write McGill's obituary. A more daunting job I have never undertaken. I still remember my lead:

"Ralph McGill, the conscience of the South, died last night of a heart attack . . ."

Even in their grief, the desk editors would not allow my editorializing. They changed the lead to say that the publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution* had suffered a massive heart attack and died. They prevailed in their argument against my description of McGill. But if truth is an adequate defense then my lead was defensible. Because Ralph McGill *was indeed* the conscience of the South.

And one of her best storytellers.

And one of her best historians.

And one of her irascible, funny, unblinking, naive, warm, opinionated, tolerant, inquisitive, lovable native sons.

We gather—can it really be twenty years later?—to honor a man who stirred the deepest emotions and caused all true Southerners some uneasy thoughts as well as some memorable intellectual journeys.

First, the man:

He went once with Jack Tarver to visit Richard Russell, who then had been a United States senator for forty years. In the cab on the way back to their hotel, he remarked that Russell was a real hypochondriac. Tarver wanted to know how he could tell. "I looked in his medicine

cabinet when I went to the bathroom. Didn't you? What kind of a reporter are you?"

His picture and his column appeared seven mornings a week on the front page of the *Constitution*. All of us knew about a man in Buckhead who despised McGill so much that he paid his newspaper carrier fifty cents a week to clip the picture out before throwing the man's paper. McGill the despised.

He ripped knowledge out of books, literally. One Saturday morning I was sitting in my office frantically trying to write my own column. He charged in and asked if I had a book of Brendan Behan's work. I did. "Do you mind if I take page 273 [or some such]?" I said no and he actually tore the page out of the book. He could sometimes remember the exact page number of things he had read. McGill of the nearly photographic memory.

He didn't know what to do with himself if he wasn't working. He almost always would begin sending columns back before a week's vacation was over. He used to say, "I always take two suitcases, one full of clean clothes and the other full of books. I always run out of books before clean clothes." McGill the prodigious reader.

He worried endlessly about his own point of view. "Some people think it's inevitable that you get more conservative as you get older, but I don't agree with that. I think you have to work at keeping an open mind." McGill the liberal.

He clung to some values and became upset when other people wouldn't verify his observations. In the spring of 1964, McGill and one of his trusted editors invited me to sit and talk with them. I then wrote Southern politics. They asked me about the coming election campaign of President Lyndon Johnson. I reported dutifully that the New Deal South was about gone, that the sons and daughters of the Great Depression were not voting like their parents. He became about as agitated as I ever saw him because he *didn't want* it to be that way. McGill the traditionalist.

I tell these old stories for a reason. Some of the students at this fine institution were not born when I wrote that the conscience of the South was dead. If they know him, it must be as a man whose columns have been collected in books, or as a distant figure whose real life is unapproachable. If I could, I would give them a picture of a warm and caring man, good but not perfect, liberal but not wild-eyed, tolerant but not of Republicans, thoughtful but playful.

The kind of man who wouldn't answer his mail. "If you don't answer it for about four months, you don't have to answer it at all," he would say. Then he would throw the mountains of paper in the trash can one day and have a photographer take a picture of the barren desktop, with himself seated smugly behind it. He would send the picture to Tarver with the caption, "Clean desk man."

If you ever saw his office, you know it was a testament to how much people loved him. The office walls and closets were filled with things people brought him as gifts. The mud-brown wasp's nest hanging there surely was the biggest ever. Children's smeared finger art was stuck to the wall with tape or tacks. There was legitimate concern that all the corn whiskey stored in glass jars in his closet would be found by the "revenooers." He must have kept all this stuff to remind himself that he was writing for plain country people as well as the sophisticates.

Writers and editors have tried to categorize McGill as a reporter. It cannot be done successfully. To be sure, he traveled the world writing about its condition. (And he could be pretty pompous about it. He wrote, "I have been but twice to Karachi." Ed Danforth, the late sports editor of the *Atlanta Journal* who brought McGill to Atlanta, promptly answered him in print, "I have been but once to Little Rock—That was enough.")

McGill was an acute observer of all that surrounded him. But it is a major mistake to try to draw lessons on objectivity or fairness or hard investigative reporting from his work. He was an essayist, a storyteller, a thinker, a social critic, a conscience. Those attributes are not necessarily the qualities of a good reporter. Rather, they are precisely what a great newspaper must have at its core. Somebody has to assume the job of commenting on local as well as national issues if the paper is to fill its leadership role.

Other great people have assumed similar responsibilities. One thinks of Henry Grady, the *Constitution* editor who preached of the New South. Of Hodding Carter of the *Greenville (Mississippi) Delta Democrat-Times*, who stood so bravely against the Klan. Of Gerald W. Johnson of my *Baltimore Evening Sun*, who wrote, "When a Southerner does evolve into a liberal, he is the sturdiest, most unshakable liberal on earth."

McGill was in that tradition, but he had one further quality which set him apart. He was a great writer. And he worked to a formula. For several days he would write unflinchingly about the evils of society. Then

he would sense the tolerance level of his readers was at its limits and he would write something light and beautiful about fox hunting in the mountains or football players running on strong legs that weak legs could walk.

He always talked about good writing. When his friend, the North Georgia poet Byron Herbert Reece, died early, McGill wrote, "The mountains were in his poetry and ballads. They, and the Bible, which had come into the mountains in the saddle bags of horseback riders or in the old trunks in the oxen-pulled wagons, colored all his poems. The skies, the clouds, the cold lakes, the tumbling rivers, the forests, the cold, keen nights when the stars looked green as ice, the winds of summer and winter, the wild flowers, the corn and cattle—all these were in his poems as were the prophets . . . of the Old and New Testaments."

He went to Flat Rock, North Carolina, for the funeral of his friend Carl Sandburg. A minister read a Sandburg poem and then, McGill wrote, "some few of us joined in a low singing of the old song ['John Brown's Body'] which Sandburg thought one of the most rousing tunes in American history . . . [Sandburg] was a man for all the world, and so it seemed here today in the quiet little church tucked away among the trees and flowering shrubs of western North Carolina."

Unlike Reece or Sandburg, McGill had to produce seven days a week. He had little time to polish or rewrite his columns. But he had an unsurpassed work ethic. His colleagues used to stand in awe as he wrote one column for the first edition, and then substituted a piece on an entirely different subject for the later editions. And he did that on a large number of occasions. Over a forty-year period, he must have written about fifteen thousand columns. A man who has little or nothing to say simply could not have endured so much pressure to produce.

McGill always had something to say. What I propose to do here is take some current concerns and link them to his writing. Perhaps he would not express exactly the same viewpoints now, but his thoughts are both provocative and instructive.

His early success was tied to the farm. He grew up on one in East Tennessee and reported on them so well that he won a Rosenwald Fellowship in 1937. During his career, the family farm had begun to disappear, plowed under by both the corporate farmers and world competition. But listen to how he wrote about the rural South:

"I am just about convinced that the very best part of the country lies up some dirt road. The highways are magnificent for travel. But after a

while they come to be lined with signboards, barbecue signs, all spelled Bar-B-Q, with gas stations and 'Eats' shops.

"After a while all highways come to look alike . . .

"[At a church meeting] there was the pride of the women and rivalry in cake-baking and in the golden piles of fried chicken. I wish every short-order cook in the world and every . . . chef who thinks he can fry chicken could visit one of these 'dinner on the ground' events. You have to travel up a red clay road to find a real one."

Perhaps he did idealize some of his experiences, and he certainly did not live the simple life himself. But he worried about whether the people who had experienced only farm life could make it in the cities. Listen:

"A Southerner remembers seeing the desperate efforts by small farmers to hold on. Down the rows of a patch of cotton he watched many a family go—Grandma in her old dress and poke bonnet; the mother and father, worn and gaunt; and the stair-step children all strung out armed with a rag-wrapped stick and a bucket or can of poisoned syrup. The enemy was the weevil . . .

"[Then] these small one-mule farmers and the straggling families with their buckets of poisoned syrup and their sticks with rags wrapped at one end were gone to town—hunting jobs for which they had no skills. The massive out-migration had begun."

At least part of his abiding interest in education came from this fear that the simple folk would end up like John Steinbeck's Okies, wandering the roads in hopes of finding jobs they could keep. In his classic column, McGill said that the fleas come with the dog, and the bigger the dog the more the fleas.

Yet he saw hope in the cities. He would have been mighty proud of Atlanta last summer. The city hosted the Democratic National Convention and his old paper did a meritorious job of covering it. One can almost hear his squeaky old voice singing both the National Anthem and "Happy Days Are Here Again" as part of the Democratic throng.

McGill loved the national political conventions. In Los Angeles once, he wrote about the young John Kennedy and "the girls in their diaphanous blouses" in the same column. A young reporter thought he couldn't make that work, but he did.

It isn't clear, looking back, that he would have been very happy with the outcome of the most recent Democratic Convention. He liked politicians who knew and loved the language, thought well on their feet, uni-

fied with their force of personality. He might not have found those qualities present in 1988. He was an Adlai Stevenson man and was buried with a Stevenson campaign (hole in the shoe-sole) tie pin.

No need to guess what he would have thought of the Presidential debates. He would have watched those memorized recitations with sadness, and perhaps a little despair. He would have seen through the threadbare thoughts. He would have yearned for real debate by thoughtful men and he would have hungered for even a stumbling answer to a hard question.

It is possible to know these things by reading his work. For example, he watched Richard Nixon and Edmund G. (Pat) Brown debate in a heated California governor's race and wrote:

"Mr. Nixon was the more polished, the more articulate. Gov. Brown was, in contrast, bumbling and groping for the right words. But . . . the public sympathized with the governor because he seemed more the human being, and less the smoothly articulate, professional debater."

McGill would have been dismayed as well by the broadcasters' reporting of the campaign. He believed in the essay, the elegant writing of Edward R. Murrow. He wanted to hear the clashing of ideas as they clanged through the corridors of minds. The "sound bite," nothing more than a quick phrase or a simple sentence from some politico, would have struck him as either meaningless or so shallow as to make a mockery of democracy.

Once he had written a sort of primer for learning about American values:

"A good idea would be for every family to get the Constitution and read the first 10 amendments out loud.

"That will enable us better to understand some of the Supreme Court decisions. They gall us at times, but they remind us we do have rights which to lose is to destroy ourselves."

A man who thinks families should read the Bill of Rights aloud is not likely to be much impressed by sound bites!

If the politics of the 1980s would have offended him, some human problems would have troubled him even more. Hunger and poverty and homelessness would be weekly subjects if he were writing today. The squalid conditions in which millions live would have seared his soul. Perhaps none of us can imagine what he would have written after seeing something that looked like a bundle of rags sleeping of a winter's night on the grates of some city steam system to ward off the

bone-chilling cold. But we can be sure that he would have observed, felt—and written.

We may be sure that he would have summoned us all to work out some answers. More than most others, he would have worked to understand what it is in a society that allows people to go hungry under a winter sky without ever giving them the training to hold jobs—or to be given institutional treatment if that is the proper answer. He would not let politicians get away with saying that the street people are there only because they choose to be.

And he would be appalled at our indifference to conservation. Once he went to find the headwaters of the Chattahoochee River in the Blue Ridge mountains of North Georgia. Talking about the trees there, he said, "Stark among them stood the white dead trunks of the giant chestnuts, white as old bone, accusing memorials to the blight which took them and a reminder that if man does not become more of a conservationist others of his trees will go." A man who loved and wrote about nature as well as he did could never have passed up the conservation debate.

The issue which mattered most to McGill, however, was race and discrimination. What would he say to us twenty years after his death and thirty-five years after the fateful Court decision on school segregation. He was the man who wrote:

" . . . one of these Mondays the Supreme Court of the United States is going to hand down a ruling which may, although it is considered by some unlikely, outlaw the South's dual school system

"Somebody, especially those who have a duty so to do, ought to be talking about it calmly, and informatively

"The vital point is—there is no reason for violence, whatever the decision. Leadership everywhere in the South must talk about this and make it clear. Anger and violence solve nothing."

Well, he would take encouragement from the choice of a black Atlanta educator for the new President's cabinet. He certainly would be pleased with the growing number of well-educated black men and women in the professions and in public office. He would see his city led by a black mayor, one of Dr. Martin Luther King's lieutenants, and be full of praise.

But he would be heartsick, too. His old newspaper had a piece the other day which said the Bankhead neighborhood had become so dangerous that the U. S. Postal Service and phone company temporarily re-

fused to serve it. A few days later, bus service to the neighborhood was interrupted when a driver saw men with guns crouching in the bushes.

Some will say that he would have had to recognize that race was no longer a "Southern problem," but one which was national. And it is true that the South has behaved better than some other places in trying to right old wrongs. But McGill was a Southerner, and he would have wanted his region to set an example, particularly in this field.

Drugs, the scourge of the inner cities all over America, seemed particularly difficult to combat in minority neighborhoods. We may be sure he would have felt sympathy for the law-abiding citizens trying to work and raise families in those gun-toting outposts. He also would have counseled against violence, as he did all his life. He probably would have been as helpless as the rest of us in trying to fathom what can be done about drugs and the troubles they bring.

True, McGill was soft-hearted and something of a romantic. He frequently thought government could achieve things which really are beyond its ken. Nonetheless, it is wrong to think of him as a sap. He could be as tough-minded as a general when it came to difficult problems.

So what is his legacy? What is there for journalists to learn from him? First, we must understand the gap between reporter and columnist or editorialist. The functions are not the same. The public feels ever more strongly that we are allowing our opinions to color everything else we print or broadcast. Some of us are indeed guilty of allowing our associates to cross the line, and some of us have pushed past the line ourselves.

In journalism schools, it is traditional to debate the point. Professional forums also raise the questions: Can we realistically hope to attract bright, caring youngsters to produce factual, non-opinionated reporting? Isn't their very motivation to report wrongs so that they will be corrected? Isn't objectivity a hopeless cause, since everybody brings his rucksack of prejudices to the subject?

McGill believed objectivity was impossible. He wrote:

"Objectivity.

"Truth, I want. But not objectivity.

"I want truth and not objectivity, for the simple reason there isn't any such thing as objectivity, and cannot be any such thing.

"Not only that, there shouldn't be . . .

"In chasing it we have dulled our stories. We too often made them frightfully boring, plodding unfolding of events, in which the words,

like plowmen plodding their weary way, were strung together like mud balls when they might as well have been pearls."

In fairness, it should be noted he wrote that well before the excesses of the alternative press had gotten so completely away from factual reporting. But those of us who really cared for McGill have defended him so often that we have earned the right to disagree with him. And I disagree emphatically on this point. So does the reading public. It wants facts, colorfully presented and placed in an understandable context. And it wants opinion, clearly labeled and thoughtfully written. Both have significant roles in our communication system.

What is most troubling to American journalists is that millions cannot read and millions more choose not to. The national Sunday circulation is stuck at just over sixty million papers. The actual readership by adults of daily newspapers has fallen from 76 percent to 63 percent in the past twenty years. Part of the decline, I believe, is that some people thought we were deceiving them with biased reporting. Editorializing in our columns limits our ability to communicate with a wider audience.

If we first understand that there is a difference between reporter and essayist, we then must appreciate how to get from one to the other. It does not necessarily follow that a great reporter becomes a good columnist. We all can think of bright prospects who became failed columnists. The disciplines are different. Both disciplines call for endless energy and curiosity, but the data are used differently.

Our readership studies continue to show that customers are looking for factual material to help them lead better lives. Health news has avid readers. Science news has gained an expanding audience. Business page readership is up sharply. Factual material attracts. This is true partly because people are so busy that they cannot read everything, and partly because the segmentation of audiences has been taught by everything from television sports networks to magazines for entrepreneurs. Our editors and reporters face the daunting job of supplying hard data which customers both want and need.

Meanwhile, there is the job of making the enterprise run. McGill most certainly would have agreed that professional management is needed. Indeed, he left all of that to others. Even though his job title was publisher, he could not have guessed within \$100 the cost of a ton of newsprint. He would not have known the difference between an inserting machine and a counter-stacker. But it would be absolutely

wrong to assume that he did not care about the economic viability of newspapers. His own paper, the *Constitution*, weakened during World War II because the owners made a classic mistake. The owners chose to use their scarce newsprint to print big newspapers with all the advertising they could sell. The rival *Journal* chose to ration advertising and accept more subscriptions. After the war, when newsprint was abundant again, the *Journal* had the readers and attracted more advertising. Eventually the *Constitution* had to be sold to its healthier rival. So he knew the costs of mismanagement.

The managers, he used to say, are the people who hold the soapbox steady. And he knew that the papers "must come down and live with the people . . . fight with them and for them . . . their health, their housing, their living conditions, their children, and their whole panorama of interests."

Newspapers can fight for the interests of common people only when they are run well. The technology and modern printing methods are big business. The best newspapers may keep 15 to 20 percent of all the advertising and circulation dollars they attract. Giant media companies have come to be traded on the stock exchanges with values which approach the largest industrial companies. Even the smallest papers return handsome profits if they are managed well, and are avidly sought by the big chains. Protecting these economic franchises is the job of owners and managers. But the economic values have to be balanced against the editorial responsibilities if readers are to have faith in the papers and if democracy is to be served by them.

In my (possibly biased) view, that is precisely why management must include people whose career paths have been through newsrooms and editorial departments. It is not enough to pay homage to the idea of editorial independence; one needs to have experienced the wrath of politicians and preachers and developers who despise an article. And journalism schools must expand their teaching to include mid-career training in successful general management if we are to fill the need for news-oriented managers.

All this is necessary to make possible the job of the essayist. That job is to pull together the strands of the web of life and fashion a pattern which can be seen and understood. Which is the job McGill did so brilliantly for forty years. In his bones he knew it was his responsibility to think about his region in a way nobody else could. Listen to him in his book, *The South and the Southerner*:

"Why isn't it possible to discuss the conscience of the Rocky Mountain states, the West or East?

"It is the fate of the Southerner to be involved in his region, always to feel himself held by it. He may never have believed the myths. The often cruel injustices of the rigid formula of race may have offended him and aroused him to open opposition. The cost of parochialism and injustice, not merely to the Negro but to the material and spiritual welfare of his own people, may long have been on his conscience . . .

"Segregation is estrangement. It is a withdrawal . . . that is close at hand . . . This is a part of the guilt and accusation that make up the mosaic of Southern conscience."

One may conclude that McGill was thinking of his own epitaph when he said the fate of the Southerner is to be involved, to be held by his region. That is no mean life; indeed, it is one which most of us will experience as part of a journalistic career. The difference with McGill was that it never stopped for him. He said he took the troubles home with him, worried about them through the night, and brought them back to work with him the next morning. There was no leaving the work at the office with him.

Because, no matter how circumspect the obituary editors tried to be, he *was* the conscience of the South.