



Celestine Sibley

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## THE McGILL LECTURE

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As you know, this is the 13th Ralph McGill Lecture—and I might as well confess to you that that number gives me qualms. I'm not particularly superstitious, but to be No. 13 makes me a little nervous, and to follow the even dozen distinguished men and women who have appeared to honor Mr. McGill is downright frightening.

As you may have noticed, all but two of them were publishers. That's scary in itself. From where I sit, a reporter-columnist, publishers are awesome figures, people you speak to in elevators and are filled with a dark foreboding if you run into them elsewhere.

I heard some of the lectures, and John Griffin was kind enough to send me copies of them all; and, of course, they were excellent. They were eloquent in their admiration for Mr. McGill, learned about the future of newspapers in our world today, and prophetic about what his influence would have been.

I can't tell you about that. I don't even speak publisherese. So I thought I would talk to you about the lighter side of Ralph McGill, the man those of us who worked with him knew. I say "worked WITH" not "FOR" because he put it that way himself.

Once somebody said I wrote what McGill told me to write. He laughed aloud: "I never TOLD her what to write—and if I did make a suggestion she ignored it."

That's not exactly true but it's close. He didn't tell us what to write. He took pride in saying that the *Constitution* hired writers and let them write.

A young newcomer to the staff came to my desk not long ago. "Who is that man in the picture out there in the hall?" she asked. "Why, Ralph McGill," I said, surprised.

"And who was he?" she asked.

She was polite lest she offend me by her failure to recognize some local hero, but she was also a determined seeker after knowledge.

It was a question I found unsettling. How could any newspaper person, however young, not know? Could any American who knew of George Washington and John F. Kennedy not know of Ralph McGill?

"Did you know him?" she asked, and I told her that I did. And then I sat there for 10 minutes wishing I had known him better, had paid more attention and learned more from him in all the years that he had wandered, distracted or amused or curious, about in the *Constitution* newsroom.

He was often there, leaning over to read telegraph copy as it flowed in a paper tide from the Associated Press printers. He questioned reporters and editors about local and state stories. He often sneaked into his old bailiwick, the sports department, to hide out and knock out a column while visitors waited and the telephone shrilled in his office.

The question, Who was Ralph McGill? is not easily answered even now, 22 years after his death. He was so many things, so many people—a hero, a crusader, a public figure, a reporter, an editor, a homely country-reared man who was welcome in the councils of the mighty all over the world, a cook, a gardener, a churchman, a prodigious reader, and a writer, who, a novelist friend once said, handled words like "an immoral angel."

I have a favorite example of how he handled words—oddly enough at a time when he was supposedly handicapped by strong drink. You will find people even today, bitter, hate-harboring individuals, who like to say that McGill was a drunkard. It is not so. In all the years that I knew him I never knew him to drink excessively—at most a glass or two of wine.

But I have a friend who did see him drunk once. She lived next door to Mr. McGill and his first wife, Mary Elizabeth, and she adored them. One night she saw them arrive in their driveway but before she could speak to them, Mrs. McGill, who was driving, got out of the car and stalked angrily toward the house. Mr. McGill appeared to be drunk.

She said Mrs. McGill called, "Come on in, Ralph," but he was weaving somewhat and kept bumping into the only tree in the yard. "Ralph, come on in the house!" Mary Elizabeth repeated.

"I'm trying to," our boss said piteously. "I just can't get through this impenetrable forest."

Even under adverse circumstances he had a grip on the language.

Members of the staff were always welcome in his office. In fact, *everybody* was welcome there, business and civic leaders perhaps less so than colorful politicians, a black waitress looking for a job for her son, the retired farmer who sold flowers down at the corner.

The ubiquitous *meeting*, which is so essential to today's newspaper operation, was then unheard of. Communication between the editor and the staff was personal, one on one.

Once I witnessed what amounted to an editorial meeting. Mr. McGill walked out into the newsroom and inquired about a brilliant, alcoholic, old-time reporter who was in Savannah on assignment.

When had he been heard from?

It had been quite some time.

The editor sighed heavily.

"When you hear from him," he said, "for God's sake, somebody read his copy. He can call everybody in Chatham County an S.O.B. so subtly it'll take them three days to know it."

He walked away. End of meeting.

More often, reporters went in his office to borrow rent money, to get him to co-sign notes at the bank, to tell him their troubles, or to just prop up their feet on his desk and talk.

On one occasion that I know of he dealt with a cuckolded husband even more adroitly than his friend Ann Landers could have done. We had a staffer who came back from the war to find that his wife had been having an affair with a *Journal* reporter. The husband, a veteran Marine, got drunk and got a gun and went to see Mr. McGill. He was on his way to shoot the scoundrel at the *Journal*, he said.

He was absolutely justified, Mr. McGill told him. There was clearly only one thing to do and that was to kill the rascal. But—and Mr. McGill appealed to that strong sense of loyalty in all *Constitution* staffers—"Don't do it on *Journal* time. No use giving them the story. Wait till their deadline has passed."

The angry husband saw the logic in that. He laid his pistol aside and waited for *Constitution* time—and incidentally sobered up. The urge to kill passed, and he ultimately divorced that faithless woman and married another, nicer girl.

In the late afternoon while he killed time before some night meeting or speaking engagement or waited for Mary Elizabeth to pick him up, he liked to open a book of poetry and read aloud. He tried his hand at

writing a little poetry and became shy and diffident as a schoolboy if anybody sought to discuss it. Many poets were his close friends, among them Carl Sandburg and the Georgia mountain poet, Byron Herbert Reece.

I remember being shocked by Mr. Sandburg's manners when he was hired to address a group of writers and refused to linger after his speech so they could meet him. He had a previous engagement to spend the evening with Ralph McGill, he said, rushing from the auditorium.

Byron Reece became McGill's protege, and he [McGill] went many times to the little mountain cabin in the Choestoe Valley to visit the poet and his family and even to offer him financial help, which I understand the proud young mountain man turned down. One of my most cherished possessions is a picture of Byron and his parents taken by their fireside one night when Mr. McGill visited them. It and his books were given to me as keepsakes by Mary Lynn [McGill's second wife] after McGill's death.

Mr. McGill liked to give books to newborn babies, usually their first books of poetry, and sometimes when there was a death in the family he sent poetry instead of flowers. When I grieved over the death of a friend, he wrote me a note of sympathy in longhand and put it between the pages of Stephen Vincent Benet's *John Brown's Body*.

He traveled the world covering national and international stories, going back to the time when he happened to be in Cuba when the revolution broke out and in Europe on a Rosenwald Fellowship when Hitler, "the evil evangelist," launched his takeover in Germany.

Inevitably he had return visits from foreign dignitaries and foreign newspaper people. (He steadfastly refused to call a member of the working press a "journalist," insisting that the term applied to "one who carries a cane and borrows money from newspapermen.")

I've told before the story of the member of British Parliament who called on McGill and was invited home with the editor for dinner. Mrs. McGill was waiting for them in the car in front of the building when Icky, a newspaper street salesman, and his lady, a dirty, disreputable-looking team who barked love calls to one another across Marietta Street, arrived and asked for a lift to their slum home. As warmhearted and generous as her husband, Mrs. McGill told them to hop in, which they did at the exact moment the member of Parliament hopped in.

They brought with them a soggy newspaper bundle containing what Mary Elizabeth later described as "the biggest, the deadest, the stink-

ingest fish I ever smelled, right out of a Broad Street garbage can." She said McGill fidgeted and urged her to drive faster and faster to Icky's abode. There was no report on the Britisher's reaction except that he did open the window nearest him and thrust his head out into the night air.

My experience with one of Mr. McGill's foreign visitors was no more felicitous. He came into the newsroom one day and handed me some money and asked me to take a Norwegian newspaperman to lunch for him. The young man had arrived unexpectedly and McGill had a conflict.

Glad to get a free lunch and to meet an exotic visitor, I immediately remembered my ancestors named Broxson and Henson. Seeking to ingratiate myself with my boss' guest, I said brightly, "My great grandmother came from Sweden!"

The young man looked at me coldly.

"A Swede," he observed, "is a Norwegian with his brains knocked out."

On that graceful note I took him to Venable's for the vegetable plate. Mr. McGill never again asked me to sub for him on a social occasion.

McGill's celebrated predecessor, Henry W. Grady, is said in the school books to have "loved a nation back to peace" after the Civil War. Love of region may have had much to do with McGill's stubborn, persistent, sometimes wrathful fight to get the South ready for integration. There's no doubt that he loved the land of which he wrote so movingly, but I think it was love of humankind that propelled him into the long, patient fight for civil rights.

Born on a hardscrabble farm in East Tennessee, 30 miles north of Chattanooga, a spot now covered by a TVA [Tennessee Valley Authority] lake, he responded deeply to the pull of the land.

Harold Martin explained McGill's feeling early in his book: "He was like Dante, in that 'to him all the world is native country, just as the sea is to the fish.'"

He loved it all but he agreed with "Marse" Henry Watterson, the famed Louisville editor who contended in a bit of poesy:

Things have come to a hell of a pass

When a man can't flog his own jackass.

McGill flayed the South and the nation about the inequities of integration, about the Ku Klux Klan, and about the demagogic politicians as represented by Eugene Talmadge. Like the alcoholic reporter on the

Savannah assignment, he did it so skillfully that his subjects sometimes didn't know they had been harpooned until they saw blood.

Talmadge didn't take McGill's assaults on his brand of politics lying down. He incited his followers to near riots at political rallies throughout the state when he lit into McGill. "Tell 'em about Rastus McGill, Gene!" the group called "the tree-climbing Haggards" would shout. And ol' Gene would reply, "I'm a-comin' to that!"

It introduced a litany that enlivened barbecues and campaign stops, but back at the shop we worried about our boss. He and his family had been bomb-threatened and marched against by robed, masked Klansmen. He was the target of nasty phone calls. Sometimes at the office we were able to field them for him, particularly if he was away.

He handled those that came to his house with typical imagination. He had a little dog he named Rastus and trained to bark into the telephone. So when in the middle of the night he was jangled awake by the telephone and a voice said, "Is that you, Rastus?" he could say calmly, "You want to speak to Rastus? Just a minute."

He would hold the receiver out to the dog, who would leap into action, barking vociferously until the caller, eardrums aching, hung up.

Being older and perhaps more mellow than most of us, McGill could take defeats and disappointments with better grace. After a hot summer's campaign during which the paper supported a Marietta businessman named James V. Carmichael for governor, some of us came to regard Eugene Talmadge, his opponent, as evil incarnate.

I did a series on Carmichael's family and fell in love with them, a couple who had a big old-fashioned house on the old Atlanta-Marietta streetcar line with a big general store down by the tracks and his grandmother's old farm house across the way. On election night I was sent to sit up with the Carmichaels until the results were in. It didn't take long. Jimmy, their son, swept the state with the biggest popular vote ever won by a candidate for governor, but through the archaic county unit system for vote-counting, since abolished, Talmadge was the winner.

I went back to the office ready to cry—and I did at the sight of our crusading editor shaking hands with Gene Talmadge and escorting him to the newspaper's radio microphone to make a victory statement.

McGill did it pleasantly, graciously, and, some of us thought, traitorously. It might have been necessary, but did he have to be *nice* about it?

He was also to oppose Gene's son, Herman Talmadge. While

Herman was governor, later to become United States senator, I got caught up in a campaign to buy an elephant for the city zoo. The climax of the big push was a carefully orchestrated welcome in front of the *Constitution's* almost brand new building, catercornered across the street from the old Victorian pile where the paper had operated since 1884. Mr. McGill had agreed to emcee the show, and, although the governor declined our invitation to welcome the elephant, First Lady Betty Talmadge agreed to let their little boys appear and be photographed giving the elephant his first taste of Georgia peanuts. Instead of performing for crowds and camera, the little boys, Gene and Bobby, took one look at the elephant and broke away howling.

McGill snatched up the elder, Gene, and whacked him across the seat, setting him back to his duty. He later apologized to Mrs. Talmadge and explained that it was just reflex action, the old recurring urge to hit a Talmadge.

Betty, since divorced from the senator, recently pointed with affection to a table in her antebellum plantation house at Lovejoy:

"We had just moved in and were eating on a card table. Herman came home one night and said he had invited Ralph and Red (Mary Elizabeth's nickname) to have supper with us. I said, 'We don't have a table!'

"And the next day I went out and bought this one. I love it because of memories of that evening with the McGills, our first guests here."

Clearly when a political battle was over it was not Mr. McGill's nature to gloat or engage in recriminations. He became a personal friend of both John and Robert Kennedy, bringing them through the newsroom for the staff to meet when they visited Atlanta and accepting an invitation for himself and his family to dine with them in Palm Beach.

He was boyishly pleased that the *Constitution* was one of the papers President Kennedy read each day. When Jack Tarver, as publisher, pointed out that getting our newspaper on the White House breakfast table every morning was horrendously expensive, McGill sulked.

"I'll pay for it myself," he mumbled. "Out of my own pocket."

Tarver told of the high cost of getting the paper specially delivered to the airport, paying its air fare, and then getting it specially delivered to the White House. It was a tidy sum but not too much, McGill insisted heatedly. In the end, he realized Tarver was baiting him and he subsided, grinning, knowing that he wouldn't have to foot the bill personally.

Even as he sent off a telegram congratulating John Kennedy on his election, McGill dispatched condolences to Richard Nixon, a man he seemed to like personally after participating in his "kitchen cabinet" meeting in Russia. But he had privately suggested that election of Nixon might be punishment from God, a "scourge" comparable to visitation from Attila the Hun.

And he did not live to see Watergate.

"The only way McGill could have supported Nixon was for him to have been running against Count Dracula," wrote Harold Martin.

He did, however, cover Nixon's first inauguration—a performance notable to the staff because he suffered miserably having his copy cut, even as we did.

Turned loose on a story, McGill was prone to overwrite, and copy came pouring in from him in a flood, a deluge. At the inauguration he covered everything, including how Atlanta's police chief Herbert Jenkins looked in white tie and tails.

And like [that of] any other reporter caught by a space shortage, his prose was amputated. He set up a howl heard 'round the newsroom, dashing off a memo humorous but with undertones of anger. He delineated the deletions one by one, ending with, "At any rate—as I learned 40 years ago—it is hell to be cut."

As the years passed and pressures of his celebrity grew, Mr. McGill became less close to the staff. He regretted this, liking, I think, the image of himself as a mentor, father figure, to us all. The door of his office no longer stood wide open. His secretary, Grace Lundy, beloved to us all, tried to help us while protecting him and conserving his time and energy as he grew older.

It had been his custom from time to time to gather up a group of us for lunch at his favorite Japanese restaurant or, when he was on a diet, which was often, at a little health food cafe we called "the bird seed place" at the old Peachtree Arcade, where he especially liked the honey-sweetened ice cream.

Sometimes he took a few of us to the basement storeroom at Vick's, Max Muldawer's restaurant-delicatessen a block away on Broad Street. There in the late afternoon we sat around a scrubbed kitchen table amid boxes and bags of groceries and sipped red wine and ate cheese and cold meats and read poetry.

These favorite places were razed out of existence, and Mr. McGill's leisure time was nearly so. This bothered him. He wanted to know the

younger members of the staff and, remembering his first days as a sports writer in Atlanta when he slept on a cot in the apartment of his friend Ed Danforth, he was concerned that they might be homesick and lonely. One day when Mary Elizabeth was out of town and their long-time cook-maid, Julia Crawford, was off, McGill, a gourmet cook of some stature himself, decided to prepare dinner for the young away-from-home ones. He asked me to round them up.

Eight or 10 of us assembled at the little brick bungalow on Piedmont Road, to which the McGills were later to add a spacious kitchen-family room. Wearing an apron, our boss presided over the stove and because the evening was chilly he dispatched me and Bill Fields, then a newcomer to the staff whose wife and children were still to join him, to get kindling for a blaze in the fireplace. It was a sumptuous meal, chicken cacciatore accompanied by wine and ending with fruit and cheese and elaborately brewed coffee. But the after-dinner session was the memorable part of the evening.

We sat around the fire, some of us on the floor, and listened to McGill stories. He talked of old newspaper friends, of reportorial adventures, of political campaigns and the philosophies of people we had not known but he had known well—Franklin D. Roosevelt, Gov. Ed Rivers, Winston Churchill. Naturally, before the evening was over, he took down a book by his friend Carl Sandburg and read aloud to us.

The next day we learned that, contrary to what our host had told us, Julia, the cook, did not clean up the kitchen. He did it himself, after we left, because he didn't want her to face all those dirty dishes and pots and pans when she arrived the next morning.

There were two other occasions when Mr. McGill made a point of drawing nearer to his staff—election night and the night of the big 4-H Club banquet, which was a *Journal* promotion and to which some of us were commanded to appear.

On election night before returns started coming in he would collect some of the reporters who would be working that night and take us out for a quick supper and talk of the campaigns just ending. He asked questions about the candidates, as good a listener as he was a raconteur.

The 4-H Club banquet was something which he normally would have enjoyed, liking all young people but particularly those who were involved in farm life, as he had been at their age. But he professed to dread the long evenings of speeches and awards and invariably took us to the Capital City Club to buy us pre-banquet drinks.

"We have to be fortified against all that clean-limbed youth," he remarked wryly.

After one such banquet I confided to the members of our group that I was going out with a Hollywood publicity man I had become friends with on assignments at the movie capital. He was to be in town only that evening and I was looking forward to seeing him. To my everlasting chagrin, McGill led a march to his room, towing along six convivial friends who sang their way through the corridors of the Biltmore Hotel. Even worse, when he met my friend he demanded to know what his intentions toward me were. Unfortunately, the poor man had no intentions—and I have never seen him since.

Mary Elizabeth McGill died in 1962 after lingering in the hospital for three months, most of the time with her husband sitting in a corner of her room reading or writing his column in longhand on a yellow pad and struggling with the last chapters of his award-winning book, *The South and the Southerner*.

Their son, Ralph Jr., was 17 and soon to leave for college, but none of us really suspected how very lonely Mr. McGill must be. He was not only a famous man with time-filling engagements all over the world, but also he was a very popular man, numbering among his many friends women we all thought would like to marry him.

Late one afternoon when I was finishing up a day's stint, Mr. McGill paused by my desk to chat a moment. After discussing the day's news a little, he changed the subject.

"You've been a widow a while now," he said. "It's lonely, isn't it? Or do you have somebody?"

"Well, sort of," I began. "Friends . . ."

He sighed and turned away and then he turned back.

"The worst of it," he said bleakly, "is coming home from a trip and getting to the airport and having nobody to call. All these years I've called home and said, 'I'm back.' Now there's nobody there to hear . . . or to care."

There was no use telling him that we at the paper cared, that we would be glad to hear from him. That wasn't what he needed. A moment later I saw what he needed.

"There's this young woman," he said. "I'm attracted to her. I think I want to marry her . . . she's a lot younger than I am."

His voice dwindled off and he looked uncomfortable. I had to repress a smile. He must know that we wouldn't be newspaper reporters if we

hadn't already found out that the "young woman" was Dr. Mary Lynn Morgan—a children's dentist—and we had decided that we liked her fine and would give them our blessing when they were ready for it.

"Marry her," I said. "What does age matter if you care about each other? Marry her."

Some months later, in April of 1967, there appeared a note on the newsroom bulletin board inviting the staff to the wedding of Ralph McGill and Dr. Mary Lynn Morgan at All Saints Episcopal Church. We were also bid to the reception following the wedding but warned that the punch served in the church parlors "will not (repeat not) be spiked."

I didn't see the note and didn't attend the wedding but it was easy to see that it was a wonderfully happy event in the life of a lonely, deeply troubled man. I was sure of that in November, 1968, when we were preparing to cover the trial of James Earl Ray for the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Every newspaper in the world wanted to have a reporter at that trial, and of course the Shelby County courthouse in Memphis could accommodate only a comparatively small percentage of them. The *Constitution* was the Atlanta paper, maybe the only one in Georgia, to receive a courtroom pass. We knew it was because of McGill's status. He was not only one of Tennessee's most distinguished sons, he was perhaps the most famous newspaperman in the country.

But he didn't see it that way. He considered the job of reporter the important thing and, since I was assigned to cover the trial, the ticket to the press section was mine.

"Except," he said, "when you go to the ladies' room. I'll use it then."

We had to go to Memphis in November to be mugged and fingerprinted and given a security clearance by the sheriff's office for the trial still months away. Right away I observed my boss in the role new to me—not the august editor but a working reporter.

At the airport he found my ticket was for the tourist section. "Did anybody ever tell you to travel tourist?" he asked.

Nobody had. I assumed economy was essential. He changed my ticket to first class to match his.

At the Shelby County courthouse they were taking reservations for straight-line telephone service to our respective city desks from the trial press room. I thought I should call the office and get this expense approved.

"Don't ever ask!" barked McGill. "Order the phone and ask later."

We were in Memphis a day and a night, and McGill was busier than any of the reporters there, leaving no angle to the upcoming trial uncovered. He had been in Memphis hours after the shooting of Martin Luther King Jr., and he took a group of us to the Lorraine Motel to see the slain leader's room, by then a little museum. He walked us across the parking lot to the shabby rooming house and showed us the murky, unwashed window through which Ray had shot.

He told us about the jazzman, W.C. Handy, and went with us to a little park dedicated to the black musician's memory. He insisted that all reporters from whatever newspapers stay at the famous Peabody Hotel, then shabby and rundown, now restored to its former glory. It was our duty, McGill assured us solemnly, to encourage fine old hostellers with interesting histories to stay in business.

The sheriff gave us a personally conducted tour of the courthouse and jail, and McGill mentioned a magazine piece he might like to read. The sheriff was eager to see it, and when we got back to our rental car McGill fished it out of his briefcase. I offered to run it back to the jail for him but he wouldn't have it. He was a 70-year-old-man and he limped a little from an old football injury, but he still had what is indispensable to a good reporter—serviceable legs.

At the end of the day he and I went out to the Holiday Inn's riverside restaurant and motel for dinner. He ordered us wine and a good meal and talked lovingly, humorously of his marriage. Mary Lynn didn't like to cook but she loved his cooking. She wasn't a gardener but under his tutelage she had created a series of what they called "Mary Lynn's Gardens." When dinner was over he went to call her, and while I waited in the lobby some old newspaper friends of mine appeared.

They had missed McGill's edict about the Peabody Hotel and booked a suite upstairs. They were having a party and they urged me to join them. I mentioned cautiously that I was with Mr. McGill.

"Bring him along," they said and caught the elevator. Assuming that he was tired and ready to get back to the Peabody, I mentioned the invitation only casually.

"We're invited?" asked McGill. "Well, let's go!"

A dozen or so wire service and big city reporters were in the living room of the suite, some of them from London and France. They greeted Ralph McGill with shouts of pleasure. They all knew him.

Within minutes he was ensconced in a big chair in the middle of the room and they were deployed around him, on chairs and on the floor,

asking questions, reminiscing about other stories in other parts of the world. He had a terrific evening and before he left he called Mary Lynn once more to report and tell her goodnight.

The assignment had revealed to me that he was two things: A happy husband and a whale of a newspaper reporter.

Mr. McGill died of a heart attack the following February, one day before his 71st birthday. He was buried from All Saints Episcopal Church, where he and Mary Lynn had been married, with famous people and humble people gathering by the hundreds in the church and along the funeral procession route to mourn him.

Minutes before the service was to begin, the Rev. Frank Ross, the pastor, received a bomb threat which none of us gathered in the half of the sanctuary set aside for newspaper people knew about until much later. Police checked out the church and decided it was a false alarm.

The Rev. Sam Williams, black chairman of the Community Relations Commission and pastor of Friendship Baptist Church, spoke in eulogy of McGill.

"He lived among us as our teacher, loving us as Jesus taught us to do, yet shocking us, chiding us, as Socrates did his beloved Athens," said the minister.

At West View Cemetery I found myself standing behind former Vice President Hubert Humphrey and his wife and near a troop of black Boy Scouts who had presented themselves as an honorary honor guard.

One very old black woman, who had to catch a bus to get there, arrived at the gravesite after everybody else had gone and stood a long time in prayer.

In March the James Earl Ray trial was slated to begin and I heard from the sheriff. He sent me the identification card he had made for McGill after our November visit. I handed it to Harold Martin, who quoted a column I wrote after McGill's death, which began, "If he should have to be identified at heaven's gate, I think he will be happiest if St. Peter says, 'Lord, this is Ralph McGill, newspaper reporter.'"

Harold noticed what I had not about the card the sheriff had sent. On it the editor, publisher, and Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist was identified simply as "Ralph McGill, Reporter, *Atlanta Constitution*."