

# THE 23RD ANNUAL RALPH MCGILL LECTURE

## "McGill's Army: Civil Rights Reporting, Then and Now"

John Egerton

Award-Winning Journalist and Author

The lecture series honors the life of Ralph McGill, who is remembered for his editorials on civil rights. McGill, whose reputation earned him the moniker "the conscience of the South," enjoyed a journalism career spanning more than 40 years, including several years as editor and publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution*.



# Introduction

## Dr. Kent Middleton, Professor and Head Department of Journalism

It is an honor to introduce our speaker today, a man who like Ralph McGill is a tower in the struggle for justice in the United States. It is particularly fitting that John Egerton should deliver the 2000 Ralph McGill Lecture at the University of Georgia, as the University and the Grady College reassert their commitment to diversity.

As you know, UGA President Michael F. Adams has defended in court the University's commitment to affirmative action in hiring. On Jan. 9, the University marks the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the integration of the University. The University will rename the Academic Building for Charlayne Hunter-Gault and Hamilton Holmes, the first black students to enroll at the University. Charlayne is a graduate of the Grady College.

In the Grady College, Acting Dean Len Reid has created a committee to develop plans to increase diversity. Later this afternoon, the college conducts a Roundtable to explore ways to diversify the Grady College.

John Egerton and Ralph McGill share many links. Both write with the rhythm and cadence of the South. Egerton admired McGill's columns in the *Atlanta Constitution*, written, as Egerton said, "in a style that blended sagacity, humor, righteous indignation, and melancholy fatalism."

Egerton, like McGill, asks big questions: In his book *Speak Now Against the Day*, Egerton asks: Who were the prophets? What was their vision? How did institutional pillars of society — including journalism — respond to that better vision? How did the North respond? Why was the opportunity for racial progress missed after World War II?

Egerton even says his father and McGill were "almost interchangeable persona," so similar were they in looks and interests. Egerton's father and McGill shared a rural Tennessee birth, a fondness for Southern country folks, a way with words and an understanding of their power, and a jumble of contradictory emotions on the subject of race.

Our speaker has spent a lot of time on college campuses, including Georgia. He has come to UGA frequently as a central figure in the Popham seminars, seminars attended by academics, writers and street reporters from the civil rights era.

Participants include the late Johnny Popham, the first Southern correspondent of the *New York Times*, Claude Sitton, later editor in Raleigh, and Bill Emerson, the *Newsweek* bureau chief in Atlanta. Several are here today, and several were on the founding committee for this lecture.

The *Constitution's* Tom Teepen is not the only participant to say the Popham seminars were an excuse to get drunk and tell lies. But the seminars also carried the torch for civil liberties, created a record, and nurtured several books, including what may be Egerton's best known, *Speak Now Against the Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South*, a book that Eugene Patterson told me he wished he had written.

Egerton once said he "made a modest career out of writing about the demise of the South," and that the region's survival was all that secured his own. He is author of more than 500 articles in publications including *The Atlantic*, *The Nation*, *The Progressive*, *Southern Living*, *Saturday Review*, *Bon Appetit* and magazines of the *Washington Post* and the *New York Times*.

He has written more than a dozen books exploring southern culture and history. In his book *Southern Food*, he writes majestically about staples of the Southern diet: "Separately, the meat of the hog and the grain of the cornstalk have enriched the diet of people around the world for at least 8,000 years." He also writes fondly of the Loveless Café outside of Nashville. Surely contented patrons drive directly from the café to their cardiologists after breakfasts of sausage, eggs, biscuits, butter and cream.

Egerton has also written for and about many educational institutions, as a staff writer for the Southern Education Reporting Service, the Ford Foundation, the College Board, the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges and the American Council on Education.

The Southern Regional Council awarded him the Lillian Smith Award for his book *Generations: An American Family*. At that time, Alice Walker and Eudora Welty also won awards. Not bad company. On that occasion, the modest John Egerton quoted Bernard Shaw: "You must not suppose because I am a man of letters that I never tried to earn an honest living."

Friends and admirers — and there are so very many — describe Egerton as diplomatic, loyal, generous, an enabler, a helper, a rescuer of history, a man of "palpable commitment."

It's a pleasure to introduce the Ralph McGill Lecturer, John Egerton.



## The Ralph McGill Lecture

It's a great privilege and an honor for me to be here this morning to deliver the 23rd Ralph McGill Lecture, at the invitation of the Henry W. Grady College of Journalism and Mass Communication. Looking over the list of speakers who have preceded me, I can clearly see that I am in very select company, if not entirely out of my league. Eugene Patterson, Mr. McGill's successor as editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, was the first honoree, in 1979. Since then, some of the most noted figures in contemporary journalism have followed, among them Tom Johnson, who now heads CNN News; Tom Wicker and Anthony Lewis of the *New York Times*; Katharine Graham of the *Washington Post*; the legendary Helen Thomas of the United Press syndicate; editors Bob Maynard of the *Oakland Tribune* and John Seigenthaler of *USA Today*; columnists Clarence Page and the beloved Celestine Sibley; and reporters Claude Sitton and Jack Nelson, two of the very best in the South during the civil rights revolution of the 1950s and 1960s, when this region sometimes resembled a war zone.

Even without such an illustrious roster to dignify it, the McGill Lecture at the Grady College would still have its own magnetism, reflecting as it does the great and continuing renown of these two erstwhile Atlanta editors, Grady and McGill, the one a colorful orator and "New South" booster in the decades after the Civil War, the other foremost among a handful of white Southerners who openly challenged segregation and white supremacy after the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously affirmed the constitutional principle of equality under the law in its historic *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling of 1954.

Henry Grady's vision of a new South, which he eloquently articulated in a speech to an audience of New York businessmen in 1886, foresaw a North-South alliance to put the bitter memory of conflict behind and rebuild the war-torn South. (In that same address, incidentally, Grady spied retired Union General William Tecumseh Sherman in the audience and referred to him humorously as a man "slightly careless with fire.")

For his part, Ralph McGill projects an even brighter image of Southern progressivism today, because in his time (a couple of generations after Grady) not just the ideal but the reality of a new South was put to the test during his influential tenure at the *Constitution*. He had been the paper's editor for 16 years when the Supreme Court handed down the *Brown* decision, and he would remain there most conspicuously for another 15. A grown-up country boy from Soddy Daisy, Tennessee, he was proud of his heritage but privately mystified and troubled by the deep strain of racism that seemed to run in the blood of most white Southerners. Throughout his early career as a writer and editor, McGill was only slightly left of center among his peers — a paternalistic New Dealer who usually went along with the laws and mores and traditions of segregation. He lashed out furiously at the Ku Klux Klan and lynch mobs, but opposed federal solutions to violence and injustice, clinging instead to a simple, patient faith that his people, the white majority, were decent at heart, and would in due time choose voluntarily to right the wrongs of bigotry.

But they never did. Instead, the Supreme Court finally assumed that responsibility, and then a charismatic young preacher in his mid-twenties, the son of an Atlanta minister named Martin Luther King, gave voice to a black protest movement on the city buses of Montgomery, Alabama — and the rest, as they say, is history.

Ralph McGill wasn't ready for *Brown*, but he never doubted for a minute that a nine-to-nothing ruling of the Supreme Court was the law of the land. The only way to resist that, he wrote, was "secession by armed force," a wayward strategy that had proved disastrously wrong the first time the South tried it, and would be insanely wrong if tried again. So McGill stood up for the rule of law, and because the white South was not ready to stand with him, he landed firmly on what was then considered the "radical" side — the side of law and order and nonviolence, the side of the judicial branch (but not necessarily the legislative or executive branches) of the federal government, the side of Martin Luther King Jr. and almost all black Americans, the side of one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Reluctantly but resolutely, McGill became the nagging conscience of the reactionary white majority, and he grew into the role with an increasing sense of mission. The more he was reviled and scorned at home, the more his courage resonated elsewhere. His daily front-page column in the *Constitution* was syndicated in the late 1950s, and soon he was being read in more than 300 papers nationwide. For millions of people, white and black, he became a symbol of reason and hope. His eloquence grew with his unrestrained candor as he zeroed in on what he called the "chloroforming myths" of white supremacy:



the myth that violence in the South was the doing of "outside agitators"; the myth that "separate but equal" justice could ever be achieved in a democratic society; the myth that the white South would ever do right by the black minority freely and voluntarily, without external pressure; the myth that the segregationists were the real persecuted minority, and theirs was the legal and moral high ground. McGill knew better, and he said so, not once or twice but hundreds of times, from 1954 until his death in 1969.

This is the man we honor today, and I am grateful for the opportunity to recall and recount his legacy. For those of you who remember his work, or who perhaps knew him personally, today is a good time to ponder the vastly changed and changing patterns of Southern life over the last half-century, and Ralph McGill's lasting contribution to a better South that is still evolving, a work in progress. For those of you under 30, born since the editor died, my aim is to leave you with some impressions that will cause you to go back and examine the man and his work, his times, and the small but influential band of Southern journalists and others who drew inspiration from his example.

Driving down through the mountains yesterday, passing close to Soddy Daisy, just north of Chattanooga, and then around Atlanta and onto the route to Athens, I thought a lot about Colonel McGill and his rag-tag army of scribes and scriveners and scholars. His home turf was always inside this Tennessee-Georgia orbit: first in his boyhood and youth in rural Hamilton County around the turn of the last century; then in Nashville for college at Vanderbilt and the beginning of his newspaper career; and finally, starting in 1929, his 40-year climb up through the ranks to the top editorial post at the *Atlanta Constitution*. As he matured in his leadership role — and as social issues in the South grew ever more contentious — McGill's columns took on a more independent tone, an almost disembodied voice. Week in and week out, his admonitions and pleas for simple justice were emblazoned on the front page of a newspaper whose management privately detested his social views, and probably would have forced him out had not the wealthy publisher, one-time Democratic presidential nominee James M. Cox of Ohio, granted McGill protection from such arbitrary assaults.

Ralph McGill's public contribution to the South's transformation from a segregationist backwater and third-world colony to a fully equal (some would say superior) player in the national life of the United States can be discerned by reading his columns and editorials, his magazine articles and books. That is primarily how he is remembered today: as a progressive and outspoken champion of equality for all Americans. Those who take the time to examine his early years at the paper in Atlanta will be the more impressed to follow his transformation from a resigned acquiescence in segregation to an abiding conviction that all forms of racial and religious and economic discrimination not only violate constitutional principles, but also fundamentally conflict with the long-term interests of the people, white and black, rich and poor, North and South.

In a few minutes, I'd like to linger over this place and time — that is, the American South in the postwar generation (I'll arbitrarily frame it as, say, 1945 to 1970) — hoping to provoke some thought and discussion about McGill and his contemporaries, and about the state of journalism, then and now.

But first, permit me to say a little bit about this made-for-TV docudrama we're slogging through at the moment, with no end in sight. This is a digression, I'll admit — you didn't invite me here to pose as a political pundit — but it's such a historic and singular turn of events that it would seem a little odd to ignore it. And besides, it does have to do with journalism and politics and social issues — the things McGill cared about most — so I might as well tell you what I think about it all, and get it off my chest. It's not much of a stretch to imagine that McGill would have done the same, eagerly.

What is arguably our most fundamental and important right as citizens of the oldest democracy on the planet — the right to vote — has been besieged in recent years by "soft" money and attack ads, by single-precinct tallies and computer-driven extrapolations and exit polls (why would anyone spill his guts to a perfect stranger on the way out of the polling booth?). The net result of this subterfuge is a game that's already over east of the Mississippi before the polls close in the West.

In campaign after campaign, we've been forced to watch the omniscient networks falling all over themselves to "call" the states for one candidate or the other as soon as the last voter is out the door — and call them right, which is all the more maddening. They would do anything, it seemed, to boost ratings, and every time they did it and got away with it, the



electorate grew more cynical and alienated. The quadrennial election of our presidents has been reduced to just another phony TV drama, a political "Survivors," with the candidates voting one another off the mainland, state by state by state.

Until this year. Until not just one network but all of them called a pivotal state — Florida — too quickly, and got it wrong, and took it back, and then, a few hours later, called it wrong again, and took it back again, and we've been stuck there ever since. One week and 15 hours after the polls closed, they're still counting Florida. This amazing and incredible and ongoing civics lesson known as the election of 2000 will linger in our memories for many years to come. Not since "All Monica, all the time" have we had a more mind-boggling mishmash of lawsuits, rumors and innuendo, neologisms and parsed phrases, charges and denials and countercharges, sanctimonious pronouncements, calls and recalls, counts and recounts and no-counts. If all this is not enough to compel us to reform the system before we vote again, we don't deserve to be called a free and democratic nation.

Think of it: Two candidates, both proudly self-proclaimed (if dubious) Southerners, have split 100 million presidential ballots right down the middle, and the final call on which one of them gets to move into the White House may turn in the end on the "hanging chads" clinging to a few hundred computer punch-card ballots in a single Florida county. Chads? The God-fearing people of Chad, a tiny nation in the heart of Africa, could rightly take umbrage at this term, which in the world of cyberspeak means the little scrap of paper punched out of a computer card. We regularly send delegations of observers out to monitor elections in fledgling democracies around the world; maybe, in the interest of reciprocity, we should ask our international ambassador, Jimmy Carter, to invite a delegation from Chad to come and observe our electoral process, and pass judgment on the effectiveness and fairness and overall quality of this nation's exercise of the right to vote.

We should be sobered and shamed by the flawed performance of the TV networks and the lawyer-saturated political parties (most disturbingly, by these two institutions in tandem, as was the case last Wednesday morning at 2:30 when the Fox network's John Ellis, a first cousin of George and Jeb Bush, led the second premature network rush to judgment for the GOP ticket, even as he excitedly gave the news to his cousins over the phone). So much unsavory sausage grinding away in the Confederacy of Dunces seems more than enough to alienate not only the half of the electorate that didn't bother to vote, but the rest of us diligent dreamers too.

Nevertheless, this has been one of our better elections in recent history, especially when you factor in the civics lesson. In our classrooms and workplaces, in the shopping malls and out on the streets, more people than ever seem to be energized by what is happening; they're still buzzing about this controversial election. They want to know why every state, every county, has its own peculiar way of running an election. They want to see some understandable ground rules applied to ballot design, voting machines, and counting methods. They want to know why \$3 billion was spent to elect a president. Truth be told, it seems fair to say the American people (if I can presume to speak for them — but since every politician does, I'll assert my equal right) want to see the whole system reformed, top to bottom, from the count of bucks to the count of ballots. People are mad, they're disgusted. But instead of taking up arms and manning the barricades, or seizing the media and the banks in behalf of one faction or another, they're watching football games, and playing the stock market, and showing up for work, and going to school, and taking vacations, and shopping 'til they drop.

Is this a great country, or what? I think it's safe to assert that Ralph McGill certainly would be saying so, were he here talking and writing about everything that's happening. I'd also like to think that he would still have plenty to say about all the unfinished business we face in this democracy-in-the-making, including the business of campaign and election reform.

I'm only sorry that he and all his journalistic compatriots of the 1950s and '60s aren't here to interpret this election. Whichever way it goes, it's almost certain to be another big step in the evolution of the South from depression and defeat to national parity over the past century. McGill lived long enough to feel the heartbreak and tragedy of the assassinations of John and Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. He witnessed the forced retirement of Lyndon Johnson, and the election of Richard Nixon over Hubert Humphrey. McGill had been dead for seven years when a moderate Georgia Democrat, former Governor Jimmy Carter, won the presidency (even as the Republicans were nearing completion of a takeover of Southern states in retaliation against President Johnson, a Texan and a Southerner who had engineered the passage of historic civil rights legislation during his White House tenure in the 1960s). One of those bills, the Voting Rights Act of 1965, secured democracy at last for approximately one in five Americans who, because of their skin color or other irrelevant identifiers, had



previously been excluded from full participation. Not as a mere coincidence, but as a direct result of this law, there are now close to 10,000 non-Caucasian elected officials in this country, and by far the most of them are here in the South, where virtually none served before 1965. McGill saw the beginning of that transformation, and was greatly encouraged by it.

He was gone by the time Republicans in the South and elsewhere, having rebounded from the Watergate scandal, began to consolidate their power in the Ronald Reagan years. In time, much of the leadership of both parties in both houses of Congress has shifted decisively to this region, underscoring the apparent truth embedded in a book title by David Chandler: *The Natural Superiority of Southern Politicians*, a book that was published before most people had even heard of Bill Clinton of Arkansas, who is now retiring as the first two-term Democratic president since Roosevelt. Whatever else you may think of him, Clinton is a consummate politician.

Before I wandered off the subject, we were about to take a look at McGill's South in the postwar years and on into the civil rights era and the turbulent 1960s. Let's go back there now and pick up a few threads.

Picture Atlanta in the summer of 1945: Aug. 14, the day the war ended, and Americans by the thousands poured into the streets to celebrate a long and costly quest for victory over the Axis powers. McGill leaned out the window of his fourth-floor office and cheered with the throng of revelers on Forsyth Street below. He saw a new day coming, especially for the South. With his wife at the wheel (he never learned to drive a car), he ventured out the next day to take the pulse of his countrymen — went to Warm Springs to pay tribute to the late President Roosevelt, dead just four months previously, and to a military hospital nearby, taking part in a ceremony of thanksgiving conducted by war-wounded patients. McGill was moved to tears by the heroism and sacrifice of so many, whether in battle abroad or in dedicated service on the home front. "All I can see for this country is the green light," he wrote in his next-day column. By his every thought and action, he affirmed his belief that the green light meant forward movement for all.

The return to peacetime was a golden opportunity for the South to put aside, once and for all, the extreme isolation, poverty, depression, and division of the previous century and take its rightful place in the national family. As editor of one of the largest and most influential newspapers in the region, McGill was determined to see that the opportunity was not missed. He knew, of course, that he could not do it alone — but in that time before television and the Internet, when newspapers carried so much weight in the shaping and moving of public opinion, he understood how vital it would be for newspaper editors and others in positions of authority (ministers, scholars, business and labor leaders, politicians) to steer people in the right direction.

Since all Southern roads (and railroads, and soon jet planes) led to Atlanta, it was only natural that a great many journalists returning from the war or from the North found their way there, and to McGill's office. Some, like Harold Martin and Jack Tarver, wrote for the *Constitution*. Others were young but seasoned editors elsewhere — Pete McKnight in Charlotte, Jonathan Daniels in Raleigh, Bill Baggs in Miami, Harry Ashmore in Little Rock, Mark Ethridge in Louisville, Coleman Harwell in Nashville, Hodding Carter in Greenville, Miss. This informal network grew steadily. In 1947, John N. Popham of the *New York Times*, a native Virginian, was named as the paper's first Southern correspondent, working out of Chattanooga, and he quickly became a regular in the McGill circle. So, too, did a few non-journalists, notably Harold Fleming of the Southern Regional Council and John A. Griffin of Emory University. These and a few more formed the nucleus of what Fleming later dubbed the "Southern War Correspondents and Camp Followers Association," a loose confederation of white men with deep roots in the region and a more or less compatible perspective on the unfolding story of social conflict and change.

That they were all men and all white was less a reflection of their personal preferences than of the times in which they worked; women and blacks were conspicuous by their absence in journalism then. That they were almost all editors or administrators also tended to set them apart from the working reporters who would become the foot soldiers of the press after 1954. McGill and Popham and the others occasionally worked the crime scenes of the civil rights movement, but it was a younger generation of hard-nosed reporters, among them Claude Sitton of the *New York Times*, William Emerson of *Newsweek*, William Howland of *Time*, Eugene Patterson of UPI, and Wilson Minor, covering Mississippi for the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, who did the heavy lifting.



The impressive thing about Ralph McGill in these pivotal years of the late 1940s and early 1950s was the way in which he used his bully pulpit as editor of the *Constitution* to advance the cause of civil rights and civil liberties in the South. Not everyone in his informal ring was interested in advancing this or any other cause; they saw their job as simply to report the truth, whatever that turned out to be. But the editors among them, and McGill in particular, felt a different responsibility — to express opinions and take positions — and many of them did so fearlessly. McGill, in addition to his daily column, wrote for the New York magazines, and gave speeches, and spent a lot of time working with individuals and groups whose aims he embraced. He was a mentor to many young reporters, including Celestine Sibley, Reese Cleghorn, and Pat Watters. He helped William Gordon, a young editor at the *Atlanta Daily World*, become the first black Southerner to receive a Neiman Fellowship at Harvard. He touted the work of Grace Towns Hamilton and the Atlanta Urban League, and Lucy Randolph Mason in the labor movement, and such multistate alliances as the Southern Regional Council and the Southern Regional Education Board. And when desegregation finally began in the late 1950s, he championed the rights of black school children in Little Rock, lunch-counter protesters in Greensboro, and college applicants in state universities across the region, including Hamilton Holmes and Charlayne Hunter, who broke the color barrier here at the University of Georgia in 1961.

Out on the Southern landscape, many an editor of weekly and small daily papers looked to McGill for encouragement, advice, and support. Let me tell you briefly about one of them. In 1949 and '50, Amelia Knoedler, then a recent graduate of this College, then known as the Grady School of Journalism, found herself in open conflict with the local Ku Klux Klan forces in rural Dooly County, down south of Macon. She was the 24-year-old editor of the weekly *Unadilla Observer*. One summer evening, a gang of robed and hooded Klansmen stuck a cross in the front yard of the only Jewish family in town and set it afire. The young editor lived across the street, and witnessed the incident from her front porch. The next week, she hammered the not-so-secret society in an editorial, calling them "cowardly and treacherous . . . un-American and anti-Christian," and daring them to take off their hoods. "Everybody knew who they were anyway," she said.

The Klan responded with threatening phone calls, scrawled warnings on the *Observer's* front window, and other acts of intimidation, each of which Ms. Knoedler received with composure and answered with firmness. The town was largely silent, fearing retaliation. Soon, Ralph McGill jumped into the fray, publishing editorials and columns in praise of the young editor, reprinting her editorials, blasting the Klansmen as "yellow cowards . . . rats"), and challenging the people of Unadilla to unmask them and call them to account.

Amelia Knoedler fought her lonely battle with the hoods for four years, never once backing down — but never rousing the townspeople or her church or her alma mater to a public show of appreciation and support for her courage. Finally, a better job offer came from out of state, and she moved away.

When I located her on the telephone last week, the 76-year-old former editor, now widowed and living in South Carolina, remembered warmly "my strongest supporter, my buddy, Ralph McGill." He wrote to her, wrote about her, called her often. "I never was afraid," she said, "but it was lonely sometimes, because most people just didn't want to get involved. Mr. McGill gave me comfort just by calling on the phone." At one point, Ms. Knoedler made a statewide radio address challenging citizens across Georgia to put the Klan out of business, and she accused Governor Herman Talmadge of "giving aid and comfort to lawless, hooded mobs." In every way he could, Ralph McGill amplified Amelia Knoedler's voice, and held her up as a model citizen, a young hero.

And so it went through the 1960s as the South came at last to its racial crucible. Acting under the letter and spirit of the U.S. Constitution, aggrieved black citizens petitioned their government for a redress of grievances, and the judicial branch of government responded affirmatively to their petitions, and these two segments of our society, one private, the other public, compelled the rest of us to change. In my view, this story of citizen-driven social change was — and is — the biggest running story of the 20th century, because race has been and is the most important American domestic issue since colonial times. To their everlasting credit, Ralph McGill and all the journalists I've mentioned, and dozens more, white and black, too numerous to name, recognized early what a huge story it was, and stayed on it. Today, we all share the blessings of the demise of segregation and legalized white supremacy; it necessarily follows, then, that we also share the responsibility to complete the eradication of racism from American life.



It was, I believe, this combination of ideals — to tell the truth about racism, and to make a positive difference in our national life — that bonded these Southern journalists and their allies. In a South blinded and scarred by centuries of discrimination and bias, they were messengers of an inevitable new reality — and like messengers before and since, they took a figurative and at times a literal stoning.

When Ralph McGill died in 1969, the little circle of like-minded allies in and around journalism was as deep as it was wide, but still only a minuscule number, a remnant among the 50-odd million Southerners. It fell to Johnny Popham (the former *New York Times* Southern correspondent but since 1958 the managing editor of the *Chattanooga Times*) to pick up the torch. The journalists who had built close friendships over the years — McGill and Popham, Harry Ashmore and Bill Baggs, Hodding Carter and Bill Emerson and a few others, plus camp followers John Griffin and Harold Fleming — got together whenever they could, in pairs or half-dozens, as circumstances allowed.

Meanwhile, in another part of the Southern forest, McGill and Popham frequently aligned themselves with university administrators and academics, lawyers and ministers, black leaders and others of progressive intent — even a few politicians. Both of the journalists had endeared themselves to higher education leaders across the region by their consistent support of greatly strengthened schools at all levels as the primary and essential element in a new "New South." In 1969, even as McGill's life was ending, Popham inspired a small group of university administrators led by Robert C. Anderson of the University of Georgia and several staff members of the Southern Regional Education Board in Atlanta to convene an annual conference of journalists and others to talk about public issues of mutual interest. This became the Popham Seminar, a long-running talkathon that has expanded its circle over the years.

In 1977, when Popham retired from the Chattanooga paper, his publisher, Ruth Sulzberger, threw a big party for him in a side-tracked club car of the famed Chattanooga Choo-Choo. There, for the first time, a convivial merger of the journalistic and academic coteries of McGill and Popham took place. Harold Fleming called it "a confluence of two great tributaries of Southern thought." Over the years that followed, two products of the academy, Edwin M. Crawford and John A. Griffin, did more than any of the journalists to keep both oars rowing and the leaky tub afloat, and few abandoned ship except when their remains were consigned to the inky depths. The Popham Seminar has been called a drinkers' party, a liars' club, a too-white and too-male legion of old heroes in their anecdotalism, a treasure trove of oral history, a tight little gang of old-timers who still knew a lot about what was happening at the moment. By whatever description, it has been a group of great-hearted Southerners who remained in social if not philosophical harmony for more than 40 years, meeting most recently last June here on the University of Georgia campus, just six months after Johnny Popham passed away at the age of 89.

Having witnessed and participated in these gatherings myself since about 1970, and as neither a bona fide journalist nor a pedigreed academic, I can tell you that these "seminarians" were men and women who made me proud to be a Southerner. They were my mentors; they encouraged me, emboldened me, inspired me to listen, to talk, to read and study, to think critically, to respect authority but also to challenge it.

As for Popham, his memory is still fresh, and will remain so for me. I knew him for 40 years. He had a gift of speech and memory like no other person I have ever known. More than that, he had a longer view, backward and forward, than any historian or seer, and a sweeter temperament than any saint, together with an Irish wit that made you laugh at the sight of him. I must know 20 or 30 people who think they were Pop's best friend. I'm one of them. He had that gift of warmth, of camaraderie.

At his burial with full military honors in Chattanooga last December, a few of his surviving cronies stood with the family as a marine honor guard commended him to higher authority. In the wonderfully descriptive words of his old colleague Gene Patterson, "Pop pulled up his blanket of stars and stripes and took 'Taps' for his evening song." He left a few old pals in the rear, but truly, Pop was the last, the end of an era. The rest of us are in a later class, in the next generation. As I stood with the others in the bright winter sunshine, I recalled one of his many lessons, proffered years before but never forgotten. "All writing slants the way the writer leans," he said, "for no one is perpendicular." Then, after a reflective pause (his timing was always great): "But some are upright. Some are upright."



Among the handful of survivors in the merry band of Southern scribes and thinkers, two of the crustiest, Claude Sitton and Bill Emerson, are not here to heckle me this morning — absent because of health, or the lack of it. The fire still burns in their hearts and minds, but a different and less stimulating conflagration flares up in their joints and gastrointestinal tracts. I can assure you, though, that if you rolled them into your News Reporting classes on stretchers, they would rise up and terrify the assemblage like ex-cons in a "Scared Straight" program.

The gradual fadeout of the McGills and Pophams and others is symbolically sobering, in part because it seems to parallel the diminution of print journalism, and mirror the rise of electronic media, and the dreadful merger of news and entertainment. Looking at the enrollment statistics of the Grady School, I gather that only about 6 percent are majors in the newspaper sequence. The percentage rises to above 20 when magazine and publication management majors are counted in the print journalism cluster. Viewed from the other end, almost 80 percent of the college's undergraduate majors are in advertising, public relations and broadcasting. (Grady's enrollment of African Americans and other minorities, incidentally, figures out to about 10 percent, not counting foreign students.)

What can we make of all this? Maybe not much. But I do find myself wondering who will be the next McGill or the next Popham, and what will be the 21st-century issues that call forth such people. Will it be health care — who gets it, who pays for it? Or criminal justice? Or the timeless concerns of education, housing, work? Or the new divisions of electronic haves and have-nots? We are so comfortable in this country now that it's hard to stir a sense of outrage. And yet, in the midst of so much affluence, inequities abound.

Johnny Popham and Ralph McGill had a gift for inspiring others, old and young. I'll close with a story about McGill. On Feb. 10, 1959, the Atlanta editor came to Lexington for a major address at the University of Kentucky. As a publicist for my alma mater, I was assigned to meet him at the airport and be close at hand during his stay. It was a task I performed proudly, having found in his columns a voice that captured my attention and won my admiration.

He was 60 years old. I was 23. When I looked at him, I thought of my father — they could have worn the same suit and tie. They would have found a lot to talk about, too — FDR, the Tennessee backcountry, the call of the open road, home cooking, good whiskey, faithful friends. McGill seemed in person much as he sounded on the printed page — well-mannered and charming, tough and tender, easygoing but serious, a good storyteller and a good listener, sentimental and soft-hearted but capable of indignant outrage, a gentle man with a sense of humor and a distant air of melancholy. It had taken him a quarter of a century to cast his lot with the Southern advocates of racial and social equality, but for the decade he had left, he would hold fast to that ideal. McGill had his flaws, God knows, but the South was flat out of saints. Now that I think of it, I wonder if perhaps it was his imperfections that endeared him to so many people. What he demonstrated, more than anything else, was the capacity of white Southerners to change, to repudiate racism and rise up to the standard of justice and equality so courageously sought by their black fellow citizens in the freedom movement sparked by Brown and Montgomery. That was Ralph McGill's real contribution, his basic message: If he could change, if he could do the right thing, maybe the rest of us could too.

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The lecture series honors the life of Ralph McGill, who is remembered for his editorials on civil rights. McGill, whose reputation earned him the moniker "The conscience of the South," enjoyed a journalism career spanning more than 40 years, including several years as editor and publisher of the *Atlanta Constitution*.