

## *The Georgian Gargantua*

**Ralph McGill, Reporter**, by Harold H. Martin, *Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press-Little Brown & Company, 1973. 344 pp. \$10.95.*

IN 1936, the *Atlanta Constitution's* publisher beckoned to his sports editor and sent him out to cover the Senate race between the rabble-rousing Governor Eugene Talmadge and the young Senator Richard B. Russell, whose campaign had not caught fire. The sports editor joined Russell's caravan, and sent back this dispatch:

ROYSTON, GA.—Senator Richard Brevard Russell lighted the watchfires of democracy on a thousand hills here yesterday before a great concourse of people gathered from five counties to hear him. This was no mere great crowd. This was a vast crowd. . . . It shouted its approval as Senator Russell stood foursquare for the Democratic Party. He definitely pinned Governor Talmadge to the Republican Party. . . .

In the following weeks Russell marched through the *Constitution's* news columns with the eloquence of Demosthenes, the logic of Solomon, the wisdom of Socrates, the probity of George Washington, and the guts of a polar bear. He became Bayard and Lancelot, Galahad and El Cid, and any other hero of history or mythology that popped into that quondam sports editor's mind. Of course Russell became a second-term senator. And Ralph Emerson McGill became editor of his newspaper, globe-hopping sage and syndicated columnist, lost forever to the sports pages. Not since "Mar'se Henry" Watterson strode the levee in Louisville like a colossus, or Mencken held Baltimore in thrall, has an American journalist so dominated a city and state as McGill dominated Atlanta and Georgia.

McGill of course marched to fame as the preeminent conscience and interpreter of the South during its era of cataclysmic

change from a primitive rural to a modern urban society, and from rigid racial segregation to integration. Through the tumult McGill always inveighed clearly, lovingly, or scoldingly for understanding, compassion, civility. That role and reputation are well known. Less so is the character behind them, and Harold Martin's biography, *Ralph McGill, Reporter*, portrays him in full with affectionate craftsmanship.

McGill could capture the personal pathos of the economic and social earthquakes as no one else could. One of his immortal columns described the wrenching change in the South's agrarian culture forced by tractors, herbicides and pesticides. He built it around an obscure news item about an old Negro who committed suicide, leaving a note: "My old mule is dead. I am drowned in this pond." McGill's friend Carl Sandburg was moved to write, "Some time I may try to figure out who are the ten richest men in the country. You would be one of them."

McGill rose to fame denouncing the Southern version of "civil disobedience" and preaching the gospel of due process long before the years of violence in Northern cities and universities. His performance won him hosannas from the liberal establishment. He hammered at governors, mayors, ministers and journalists who silently tolerated or actively encouraged resistance to racial change—a "lawanorder" man at a time and place where to be such marked one as a courageous liberal instead of a crass conservative. He attacked the rioters and lynchers and won a Pulitzer prize for his 1958 column denouncing the bombers of an Atlanta synagogue. He wrote:

For a long time now it has been needful for all Americans to stand up and be counted on the side of law and the due process of law—even when to do so goes against personal beliefs and emotions. It is late. But there is yet time.

Ten years later he hurled similar denunciations and calls to order against the vio-

lent antiwar demonstrators in Washington and at the Chicago Democratic Convention. Many of his erstwhile liberal admirers thought he had become some sort of puppet on Lyndon Johnson's knee, and exhorted and snarled at him for it. McGill responded with the same unyielding fortitude, wondering how anyone could be surprised at his stance; he knew Kluxery when he saw it. He turned on Stokely Carmichael and the other black firebrands the same thundering editorial guns he had once aimed with such deadly effect at the Kluxers and their like; he also planted informants in their midst to enable him to expose their schemes and follies, just as he had done against the Kluxers twenty years before.

The story of McGill's editorial statesmanship and reportorial career would be stuff enough for any book. But Martin also shows us the young poet-reporter-sports-writer as his intimates knew him, with his Rabelaisian taste in food, booze, ribald exploits and laughter. He shows us the portly editor who won undying admiration for gallantry from colleagues who were covering a Chicago Democratic Convention. A nightclub stripper who used to climax her act by lighting her tassles and revolving them spectacularly had on this occasion trouble igniting them, so McGill borrowed a lighter, leaped to the stage and lit them for her.

Martin's biography presents the best of all literary pastas: a great story and a great storyteller. Martin, another Atlanta *Constitution* columnist, became one of the *Saturday Evening Post's* stars in its heyday. His prose flows smoothly, never getting in the way of his characters and *their* prose. If you enjoy the English language, you will love browsing with these two journalists, McGill amply quoted by a savoring friend who turns out phrases of his own to match. They offer a glittering double header, like hearing a Caruso and Schumann-Heink duet, or watching Tracy and Hepburn on the screen, even at times like seeing the two Jimmys, Cagney and Durante, in a softshoe shuffle on a Vaudeville stage. Martin tells

us that, "Often, in the pell-mell rush of his prose, there could be heard the rhythms of the poets and the stately cadence of the King James Testament"—not a bad piece of word music itself. He finds other editors handling a controversial issue "with the delicacy of a cat poking at a hot coal," while a McGill column "stirred up a most soul-satisfying row." In McGill's voice Martin affects to hear "an asthmatic bullfrog." His deft McGill quotations display the same love of laughter and language.

At a South Georgia field trial McGill sees in Spumoni Roma, an Italian bird dog, "a cross between a pointer, an airedale, and a chrysanthemum." In wartime Persia, McGill finds shortages that have so depleted the alcoholic potables that the only available cognac "has the aroma of a camel caravan that has just come all the way from the Caspian Sea and finished up on a warm afternoon." In Nuremberg the war criminals standing in the dock are "the plucked peacocks of Nazidom." In the world of atom bombs and superpower confrontations "fear runs through our thinking like mice through an attic." McGill thus describes an "Old South" demagogue: "Mint and cloves wrestled mightily with the bourbon on his breath, and his britches were rump-sprung from sitting much in the wood chairs of lodge halls, rural church pews, and high-backed pulpit chairs." Kluxers have "the stew of hate bubbling in their skulls."

Seeing these two old cohorts performing together again is an uncanny experience. It is as if Martin actually calls McGill back from that great Newsroom in the Sky for one last reunion at Max Muldawer's delicatessen, where McGill and Atlanta's journalistic litterateurs held their Saturday night poetry-reading and wine-bibbing sessions. McGill was such a gargantuan man, and Martin so marvelously measures and records every dimension of him, that this book truly deserves rank with the best of American biography. It is a worthy portrait of one of the titans of twentieth century journalism.

Reviewed by EUGENE H. METHVIN