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Recommended Citation

William Ray Forrester, *In Memoriam Gustavus Hill Robinson*, 58 Cornell L. Rev. 1 (1972)

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.cornell.edu/clr/vol58/iss1/1>

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CORNELL LAW REVIEW

Volume 58

November 1972

Number 1

IN MEMORIAM: GUSTAVUS HILL ROBINSON

William Ray Forrester†

There are many great and extraordinary people in the world, but most of them never become known and appreciated. These quiet heroes go through life unnoticed; the messages they convey by words and deeds remain unrecognized, except by a few close associates. Fortunately, the greatness of Gustavus Hill Robinson was not destined for such obscurity. He was a teacher. And of all the ways to spend one's life, few are so pervasively influential and so likely to be widely and fully appreciated as teaching.

Robie was a teacher and he made the most of it, for he was happily endowed with the talents with which to do it. He was a man possessed of rare gifts—a startling memory, a sharp and bright wit, a charming style, and most important, a constant and unselfish willingness even unto his ninety-first year, to reveal his knowledge and insight to others. Literally thousands of “students,” young and old, matriculated or not, enjoyed the pleasure of his company, shared his brilliant mind, and came to be his devoted disciples.

For forty-three years, the primary beneficiaries of his talents were the students of the Cornell Law School. That their appreciation should be great is not surprising.

The dedication of Volume 58 of the *Cornell Law Review* to Professor Robinson is a truly appropriate gesture in recognition of a remarkable man.

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IN MEMORIAM: GUSTAVUS HILL ROBINSON*

John W. MacDonald†

We gather today to pay tribute to the memory of a superb teacher of law, Gustavus Hill Robinson. He took all his degrees at Harvard—bachelor of arts in 1905, bachelor of laws in 1909, and doctor of the science of law in 1916. He came to Cornell in 1929 after distinguished service at Tulane, Missouri, California, Boston University, and twice at Harvard College. Prior to his teaching he practiced law in New York City, and he was an early associate of Charles C. Burlinghame, then and later one of the most distinguished and influential members of the American bar. He retired in 1949, becoming William Nelson Cromwell Professor of International Law, Emeritus, after his retirement. Several times in later years he came back to active teaching to present his course in admiralty, the field in which he attained national and international distinction. In over thirty-five years he ranged over the whole law school curriculum except property and procedure. In 1926 he published his casebook on public utilities and in 1939 his authoritative textbook on admiralty, a copy of which was in a few years to go into the library of every American maritime captain. He was a consultant of the New York Law Revision Commission and an admiralty consultant of the United States Lend Lease Administration in World War II. These are the bare facts of a most distinguished career.

We, his colleagues, his students, and the alumni, all knew him as "Robie." Our affection for him was many times made manifest, and more particularly in these later years at his annual appearances at the spring reunion of the Law School graduates. He kept his office a meeting place for us and for the present and former students of the school. He came daily to his office for over twenty years after his retirement, and he kept regular working hours. He was a man of great industry and accomplishment both before he retired and afterward.

What a host of memories we have of him! And what a good life he had! Husband and father, teacher and scholar, he lived out his years a good man to the end.

* These remarks were delivered at a memorial service for Professor Robinson on September 22, 1972, at Anabel Taylor Hall, Cornell University.

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IN MEMORIAM: GUSTAVUS HILL ROBINSON*

Frank L. Wiswall, Jr.†

Ironically, it is the rolling sea that separates me from this gathering of the friends of Professor G. H. Robinson. My presence in London at the current meeting of the Legal Committee of the Inter-Governmental Maritime Consultative Organization was mandated some months ago, and as one of its considerations is revision of the collision rules, I think Robie would excuse me.

It is easiest to think of him in the situation we most often saw him—that wonderful, terrible office. On approach, the discerning eye would note that an otherwise empty stack outside his door was crammed with the cream of the Library's resources in admiralty and maritime law. The sanctum itself held a solid wall of books on admiralty, facing a solid wall of manuscripts in numbered notebooks, with a wall of stuffed file cabinets, papers heaped atop, running between. On one of these cabinets reposed the "bespoke hat," concerning which one knew enough not to comment. From a hatstand hung a silk doctoral gown and on one wall in the corner was posted a ships' funnel recognition chart. Between the windows hung an oil portrait of a Cunarder—unfortunately not the mighty *Titanic*, on whose owners' behalf the lord of this manor, as a young practitioner, cut his first mark in the law of the sea. The floor space was almost entirely consumed by two large desks set nearly side by side, each fronted with a row of books and listing dangerously with a most remarkable accumulation of papers. And in the midst of this burrow sat Robie.

Invariably, opening of the door set in train a scenario in which the words changed but the format remained the same: "Ahhh! Come in, come in! Now sit right there and answer this: A freighter is bound up the Mississippi and she takes a pilot at the delta. The skipper of the ship is delivering a cur to a friend in New Orleans, and he has the beast chained to a table leg in the chart room. The pilot goes into the chart room for a mug of java and the hound puts its teeth into him.¹ Now, does the pilot have a lien on the vessel for unseaworthiness, or a lien on the hound as cargo, or both, and does general average or the

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¹ It happened in *The Lord Derby*, 17 F. 265 (C.C.E.D. La. 1883).

Limitation Act avail the shipowner?" You knew that a "yes" or a "no" was no good—Robie wanted the "because." A correct answer elicited a cry of victory and a concise confirmation of reasoning. An incorrect answer produced an expletive; it is no irreverence to admit that the expletive could sometimes be characterized as vulgar, because it was always both appropriate and instructive.

Thinking of Robie outside the Law School prompts a recollection in which his refusal to accept a lift when trudging the miles home and his excellent knowledge of scripture are merged—braking rather too quickly alongside to offer a ride, and being waved on with the bellow: "Thy driving is like the driving of Jehu the son of Nimshi; for he driveth furiously."²

Impossibly, as it now seems, my acquaintance with Robie spanned only ten years—nearly a third of my life, and only little more than ten percent of his. But his outlook was ageless; our friendship was real—there was no "generation gap" with Robie unless both youth and what he considered an absence of culture happened to coincide. A few of you know how profound was his influence on my career, but fewer still will know that I consider my highest encomium to be a phrase in a letter from Robie to the Faculty Board of Law of the University of Cambridge: "F. W. has become a maritime law 'nut,' 'aficionado' and 'maniac'—like myself."

What made *Robinson on Admiralty* the greatest book of the century in its field, regularly cited today and over the thirty-three years since its publication, was that Robie wrote as he thought and spoke—vitality, directly, and with the tongue-in-cheek humor that only deep love of the subject will permit. Whenever working on the manuscript of the second edition, I encounter notes in Robie's hand which coax the reader toward understanding in that inimitable vein.

On the wall of my New York office hangs a picture of Robie—a stern countenance, but with a twinkle in the eye, in shirtsleeves, looking out from behind that foundering starboard desk. His inscription is a daily inspiration: "G. H. R. giving h—l to F. L. W."

A flood of personal recollection returns, stuffed with anecdotes, instruction, and good conversation. But some things stand out in bold relief—

Intellectually generous, skeptical, outspoken, strong of will, vital in every sense.

A steel trap of a mind that knew what Mr. Justice Henry Billings

² 2 Kings 9:20.

Brown had said about the personality of ships—that knew also where, and what was, each scrap of paper in each great heap.

A wit of classic learning and epic proportion, but able to change the course of a faculty meeting with a suggestion that the University expend some of the comparatively vast sums budgeted for the sciences to establish a “Chair of Plant Psychiatry.”

An instinct for instruction which brought together the mariner’s language and the lawyer’s analysis in a form each of his students could understand and enjoy.

The oil of patrician dignity mixing smoothly—*mirabile dictu!*—with the salty water of a joyous and bubbling humor.

—These are a few of the reasons why we loved the man.

Individuality is a fact of life. But Robie is uniquely unforgettable, and the cherished memories of those who knew him are as real and enduring a legacy as his wisdom and scholarship in the law.