

What Would Ralph Say?

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Ralph Brown had “a long love affair” with Yale University Press. Those aren’t my words, they’re Betty Brown’s. They explain why it was his wish that we meet here today to remember him. The “affair” began when Ralph was in his early twenties and lasted for the rest of his long and full life.

To earn the money for his tuition at Yale Law School, Ralph worked on the Yale edition of *Horace Walpole’s Letters*, a vast undertaking that took half a century and forty-eight volumes to complete, all made possible by the splendid beneficence of Wilmarth “Lefty” Lewis. At the Walpole factory Ralph edited volumes nine and ten. Ralph’s name appears under Lefty’s on the title page; his work appears in the footnotes. The joke that swept the Graduate School that year was that Ralph’s notes were more witty, erudite, and charming than the famously witty, erudite, and charming Horace Walpole himself.

Ralph was only a few years younger than the Press, which marks its ninetieth anniversary this fall. In all those years, no member of the faculty had a longer or closer relationship with the Press or contributed to it in so many ways. Judge Pollak has spoken of his prize-winning book.¹ Ralph’s formal association with the Press began in 1963 when he joined the Publications Committee.

I should explain what that means. Publications Committee sounds prosaic. It isn’t. If the Press were a Navy ship—a metaphor I think former Navy person Brown would have allowed—the place where we make the books could be thought of as the engine room, the sales department the gun deck, and the Publications Committee the bridge of the ship, where the editors of the Press meet with the committee to set the course . . . and where Ralph always made sure we knew what we were fighting for. The PC, as it is always called, is one of Yale’s most coveted committee assignments and has the reputation of being the university’s best floating faculty seminar. Its members hold in their hands the imprint of the university, and they

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1. See Louis H. Pollak, *Ralph Brown: Farewell to a Friend*, 108 *YALE L.J.* 1473, 1474 (1999).

authorize its use *only* when books meet the university's highest standards and approach the ideals for which it stands. In other words, only when the books are good enough to carry the name "Yale" on title page and spine.

After serving on the PC for five years, Ralph became chairman in 1968, and for the next thirteen years he steered the committee in his peerless way, after which—following a heart attack that slowed him down only briefly—he yielded the chair to Jary Pelikan. The photograph in the program, which Betty found among Ralph's papers, was taken after Ralph left the chair, but you can see he never got far from it.

By my count, Ralph attended more than 200 PC meetings, presiding over 150 of them, over decisions that shaped the careers of many scholars, and over the publication of more than a thousand Yale books. In the process he guided a succession of Yale scholars who then as now are more accustomed to guiding than to being guided. Veterans of the PC will tell you that there were two qualities that characterized Ralph's leadership. The first is that he was, above all, fair. The second is that he was a virtuoso at running meetings. Every book and every author got a fair hearing. All opinions were heard, and it all happened with apparent ease, no matter how long the agenda or how knotty the problem. He had an uncanny knack for finding consensus. Best of all, he made it fun. As Louis Martz, who spent a decade on the PC, said last week, "The meetings were a delight."

Ralph conducted the committee's business with a good-humored fairness that made sure everyone was heard and no one dominated. As one of the editors recalled, "No one was better at drawing out committee members . . . or at cutting them off." An agenda might range over a dozen different fields of learning, but Ralph did his best to approach each without bias, though not always without opinion. In the late 1970s when the study of literature was taking what he considered an unfortunate new direction, he announced "Deconstruction in, Brown out." The Press published some works of a deconstructionist bent nevertheless, and survived to tell about it. And of course Ralph stayed on to educate colleagues, editors, and publishers in the proper conduct of the business of the Press.

I first met Ralph about five years before the photograph was taken (I am the dark-haired youngster at the other end of the table) when he chaired the search committee to choose a successor to Chester Kerr, who was then winding up his thirty years at the Press. It was no accident that Ralph was given that assignment. Whenever there was a crisis, whenever the Press was at a crossroads, it was always Ralph who headed the task force, conducted the inquiry, and afterwards wrote the White Paper on it. In 1978, the search and selection process was politically charged, and the assignment was a stormy one that Ralph faced up to characteristically. But that is another story that I read about afterwards in another Brown White Paper and that you can read one day when it is declassified.

I had been invited to meet with the search committee and was coming up to New Haven on the train. As it turned out, I was in the same car as another candidate, an older and very grand figure whom Chester had anointed as his successor. When we headed up the long smelly ramp that then passed as New Haven station, there was Chester at the top of the ramp to greet *his* candidate, and next to him with a thatch of white hair and sporting a bow tie and long scarf was a kindly gent who introduced himself as Ralph Brown. Chester swept his man off to lunch at Mory's in a luxurious sedan, and Ralph drove me to his office in his pickup truck.

There I met with the committee and endured an hour-and-a-half long, gentle inquisition, artfully led by Professor Brown. I can't say it was a delight, but, knowing what I know now about the politics of it, and the tensions within the committee, it was an admirable performance. It was the first, but not the last, time I saw Ralph tackling a tough job for the Press he loved, and doing it in his wonderful way, with grace and good humor, with warmth and directness, and with scrupulous fairness.

Ralph served on the Governing board of the Press from 1968 to 1988 and was an honorary governor at the time of his death. During those years, there were few of us among the governors and editors of the Press who didn't turn to him for advice on governance and copyright, and for guidance on issues of conscience and principle.

I am especially pleased to announce today that an endowment fund has been created at the Press in Ralph's name dedicated to the publication of books on civil liberties and intellectual property. We hope it will extend his legacy to those who didn't have the good fortune to hear his voice in the classroom, to witness his command of a committee, or to share his love of books and the pleasure of his company. All of us who knew him will miss him, as we surely do here in this room. We will remember him; and I know that in the years to come when we face those issue of conscience, and we search for the fair and right thing to do as we face a tough call, we will ask ourselves, "What would Ralph say?"

