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Edward R. Murrow

BY CHARLES KURALT*

I speak here of a man who, it seemed to me at the time I knew him, was the best man I had ever known. Nothing has happened since then to make me alter that judgment. Others, who knew him far better than I, shared that feeling. He was not the most courageous man I've ever known, nor the most honest, I suppose, nor the best writer—not by far—nor the best thinker . . . though courage and honor he had in full measure, and he was a fine thinker and writer. What lifted him above his fellows, I believe, was the one principle that seemed to light his life: the search for truth, his belief that freedom *depended* on people willing to search for truth, his single-mindedness about that. That is the thing that elevated him and all who knew him. On his death, the unemotional Eric Severeid spoke on the air that shattering, emotional farewell of Shakespeare's:

. . . Good night, sweet prince,
And flights of angels sing thee to thy rest!

And those who knew Edward R. Murrow felt that benediction appropriate.

You will pardon me if I speak personally at first. I was nine or ten, and I remember my parents listening to the radio, waiting for his broadcasts from London during the war. "This is London. Early this morning, we heard the bombers going out. It was the sound of a giant factory in the sky. . . . It seemed to shake the old gray stone buildings in this bruised and battered city beside the Thames. . . ." The radio was on all the time, but when Edward R. Murrow reported from London, the kids at our house didn't talk, even if we didn't always listen.

And then I was fourteen and the winner of a schoolboy speaking and writing contest, and with my mother in a hotel room in Washington, where I had gone to receive my prize. Somebody called to say, "Be sure to listen to Murrow tonight." We did, and at the end of his broadcast there was that same voice, quoting a few lines from my speech. I met the president of the United States that same day, but when I woke up the next morning, the thing I remembered was Edward R. Murrow saying my words.

And then I was fifteen, and Ed Murrow was to make a speech in Chapel Hill. A friend called me in Charlotte to ask if I would like to come up to hear him. I

* Mr. Kuralt, of CBS News, New York City, presented this address at the evening meeting of the North Carolina Literary and Historical Association.



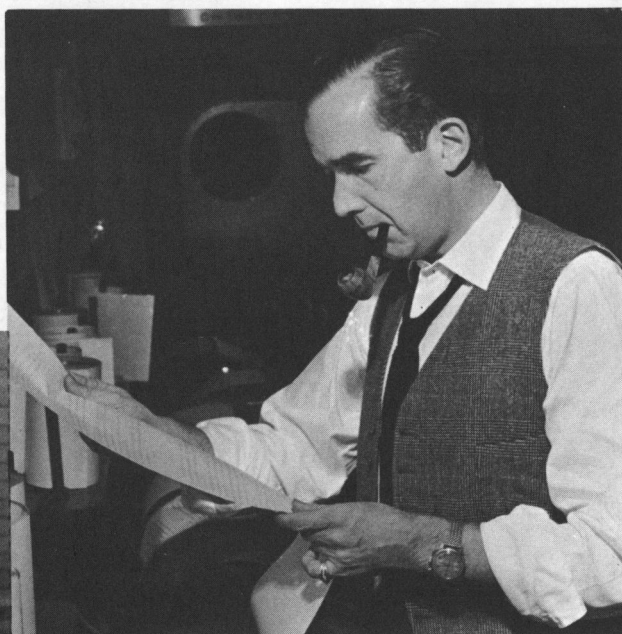
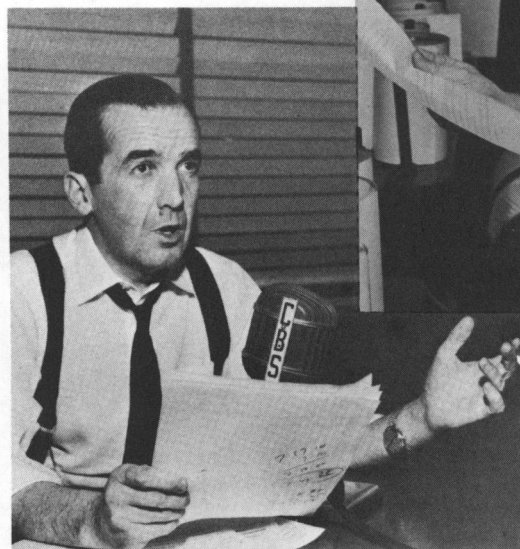
Edward R. Murrow's voice was a familiar one to many Americans during World War II when he broadcast news from London. The photograph at the left was taken in London. CBS photograph published in Alexander Kendrick, *Prime Time*, 185.

sat in the audience at the Carolina Inn and I remember thinking, "Look how close I am to him, right here in the same room with him," the kind of thing star-struck fifteen-year-olds think. He spoke about the job ahead for television news, to develop the same kind of tradition of courage that the best newspapers had long enjoyed. Afterward my friend said, "We're taking him to the airport in the morning, would you like to come along?" So I skipped another day of high school to ride to the airport with Edward R. Murrow. I wanted to know about London and New York and the world, but he would not speak, except to ask questions of the university student driver and—horror of horrors—of *me*. He questioned us in turn. So I worked on the high school newspaper, did I? What was its name? I wanted to say the *Times* or the *Herald* or the *World*, but I was forced to listen to my own voice saying, "The *Rambler*, that's its name, the *Rambler*." Do not ask any more questions about Central High School, I remember thinking, tell us about the blitz, tell us about CBS, and Ned Calmer, and Robert Trout. But he went on, looking out the window at the cotton fields that used to line the back road to the Raleigh-Durham Airport, remarking that it was pretty poor-looking cotton. I thought, hysterically, "Please do not spend this whole trip this way. Nobody cares about the *Rambler*, or the opinions of that kid who's driving, or the damned cotton." But that was how he spent the

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whole trip. I am sure he enjoyed that drive, in a passive way. But I *actively* hated it, was actually relieved to see him climb the steps of the plane, so as not to have to suffer any more of his questions. The student driver, by the way, who waved Mr. Murrow into his plane was Bob Evans, who was also to become a CBS News correspondent. I went back to the car, miserable, embarrassed, wishing I had never come along, too young and inexperienced to realize that I had spent an hour with a consummate reporter, who, facing an hour with nothing more to dig into than the opinions of a couple of kids and nothing more to study than the state of the cotton crop, dug into, studied, what there was at hand.

And then I was twenty-two and walking into the CBS newsroom in New York, on invitation, to talk about a job. It was just a little room, I was surprised by it, a few people working at typewriters, a bank of wire machines against the far wall. And then I saw him, from the back, in shirtsleeves, his galluses about to slip off his oddly small shoulders, his head bent over the AP machine, unmistakably, there he was. And for me that little room became a great hall. A few minutes later an executive was offering me \$135 a week to work in that



Two informal poses show Murrow at work at CBS. CBS photograph at left published in Kendrick, *Prime Time*, 121; picture above, courtesy of Mr. Kuralt.

room as a writer, from midnight 'til 8:00 A.M. Yes, yes, I said. I would have said yes if I had had to pay *them* to work there.

It was hero worship, but what a hero he was! It dawned on me in the months that followed that it was not only the young, impressionable beginners who felt this way about Ed Murrow. It was everybody who knew him. "Well," he would say sometimes at the end of the day, "we have done as much damage as we can do. How about a drink?" The invitation was for everybody within the sound of his voice. And we would all go down to Colbee's on the ground floor of the CBS building, and pass an hour, the well-known correspondents and the seasoned editors and the young kids, all together, all *drawn* together, by Murrow. It was very nearly the best camaraderie I have ever felt, and it helped me survive in New York on \$135 a week. He always bought the drinks.

There came a day when I wrote for him—an appalling idea, but that was the way radio worked. I actually wrote the news portion of his radio broadcast a few times, while he worked on the commentary. He would toss what he had written across to me to read over, while he timed and edited what I had written. Once, I found that he had written the expression "including you and I." I debated with myself before pointing out that it should be "you and me," wondering what he would say. What he said was "Good catch." It was such a little thing, all these are such little things, but it is a measure of what we all thought about Murrow that I remember to this day Murrow saying to me, "Good catch."

Well, he said other things. He wrote me notes, complimenting me on something I had done, or quarreling with something I had said on the air, or with the way I had said it. He did the same for many others at CBS News, especially the young correspondents, and he did it even after he had left the network. He was, until the end of his life, gracious and generous beyond all hope of explanation.

When he died, Janet Murrow received a card from Milo Radulovich and his wife. He was a young Air Force lieutenant who had been classified a security risk until Murrow and "See It Now" turned a spotlight on the case and forced the Air Force to back down. "Wherever men cherish human freedom and dignity," Milo Radulovich wrote, "Ed Murrow's spirit will stand. To him, we owe what life and freedom are ours." To those of us who worked with him, he gave something like that—a deeper understanding of what life, and freedom, mean. He left none of us unchanged.

It gave me pride in those days, and it gives me pride now, to think of Ed Murrow as a North Carolinian. It gave *him* pride. He always considered himself a Tar Heel from Guilford County, though as his recent biographer, Alex Kendrick, points out, his family moved to the state of Washington before he was six and at that time he was "obviously too young to be whistling Dixie."¹

¹ Alexander Kendrick, *Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow* (Boston: Little, Brown

No matter, he loved to refer to his upbringing on Polecat Creek, and more than once, I heard him explain that Guilford County was where Andrew Jackson "came from." On such occasions, I was a silent Mecklenburger, having ridden my bicycle past the nearby monument which marks the spot where Andrew Jackson came from in Union County—and past the other monument a few miles away in South Carolina marking the spot where Andrew Jackson came from.²

Where Ed Murrow came from, there is no such doubt. It was the Center Community of Friends, Guilford County, North Carolina. He was born there, April 25, 1908, the youngest of the three sons of Roscoe and Ethel Murrow, and he was christened Egbert Roscoe Murrow, which seems to me to have been two strikes against him. (It must have seemed so to him, too. He had changed his name by his senior year in college. His mother wrote, "I think Egbert is not happy with his name. If I had known how it looked when written out, I wouldn't have given it to him. It didn't look pretty.")

Ed Murrow's roots in Guilford County went back more than a hundred years. He came, on his father's side, from a line of Whigs, antisectionists, Quakers. His grandfather, Joshua Stanley Murrow, had a 750-acre farm, served as a Republican state senator, and helped establish what is now A & T University. His maternal grandfather, George Van Buren Lamb, on the other hand, fought in the Civil War with the Twenty-second North Carolina regiment, meaning he fought at Manassas, Seven Pines, Harper's Ferry, Gettysburg, and so on and on to Appomattox.

The son of Joshua Stanley Murrow and the daughter of George Van Buren Lamb, Roscoe and Ethel, were neighbors and were married, and Ed Murrow's first memories were of a comfortable house made of poplar and walnut, with a wide porch and a great fireplace. From his father, Ed Murrow inherited the habit of long silences, practiced before that fireplace. From his mother, he learned a striking manner of speech, a kind of old-fashioned precision with inverted phrases like "this I believe" and verb forms like "it pleasures me" which, as Alex Kendrick points out, Ed Murrow used, on and off the air, all his life.

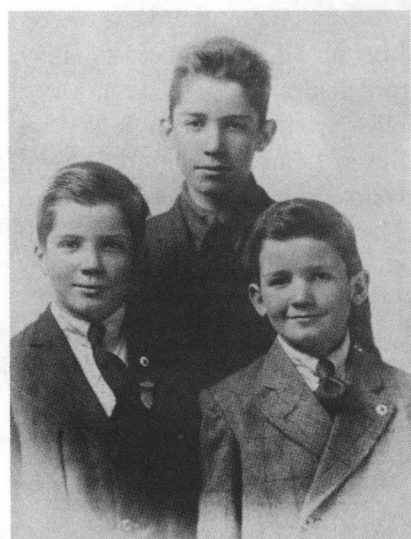
It was a strict household. Ed Murrow's mother forbade smoking, drinking, cardplaying, and work, or play, on Sunday. A chapter of the Bible was read in the house each evening and several chapters on the Sabbath. Ed Murrow grew up to be a smoker, a drinker, an enthusiastic poker player, and not much

and Company, 1969), 81. Acknowledgment and appreciation is expressed to author and publisher for use of background material from *Prime Time* for this address.

² Murrow was apparently referring to the year (1787) that Andrew Jackson practiced law in Martinsville, where the first courthouse in Guilford County was located. The seat was later moved to the center of the county and named Greensboro. The site of Martinsville is at Guilford Courthouse National Military Park. John Spencer Bassett, *The Life of Andrew Jackson* (N.P.: Archon Books [two volumes in one], 1967), 12-14.

of a Bible reader. But some of Ethel Lamb Murrow's other precepts took better hold of his life. She taught her sons to be responsible, to be in control of their lives, to respect other people, including the opinions of other people, to love the land, and to keep the peace.

His family moved to the Puget Sound in 1913, lived in a tent before they found a house, and Ed Murrow grew up in the Northwest, working in logging camps, playing on the school baseball team. He became a debater and president of the student body. He went to Washington State University, where he was fortunate enough to have a great teacher, Ida Lou Anderson. It was she who taught him to love words and thoughts, and especially the thought of Marcus Aurelius, who counseled, "following right reason seriously, vigorously, calmly . . . if thou holdest to this, expecting nothing, fearing nothing, but satisfied with thy present activity . . . *and with heroic truth in every word and sound which*



Family photographs show Murrow, right in the photograph to the left, with his brothers Dewey and Lacey. His parents are at the left in the photograph above. Both photographs from Kendrick, *Prime Time*, 84, 287.

thou utterest . . . thou wilt live happy. . ."³ At Washington State he again became president of the student body and, later, president of the National Student Federation. He began to consider the international student movement as a career. His mother, who wanted him to be a preacher, began to fear that he was going to be a politician instead.

After graduation, Ed Murrow went to New York as president of the student federation and spent his early twenties immersed in international student affairs. He worked his way to Europe more than once, married his Janet Brewster, and

³ The quotation is from the *Meditations* of Marcus Aurelius, Book III, No. 12. See George Long (translator), *The Thoughts of the Emperor M. Aurelius Antoninus* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1901), 91.

in 1935 accepted a job as CBS "director of talks," which meant that he was in charge of rounding up speakers for the network, in America and in Europe. Then, less than three years later, in 1938, he got a chance to speak for himself. In the previous year he had been made CBS European director, and he had gone to Vienna to arrange for a program of Christmas music. He was still there when Austria fell into Hitler's embrace in March. By intricately arranged broadcast lines to the United States, he reported: "Hello, America. . . . Herr Hitler is now at the Imperial Hotel. Tomorrow, there is to be a big parade. . . . Please don't think that everyone in Vienna was out to greet Herr Hitler today. There is tragedy as well as rejoicing in this city tonight. . . ."

His broadcasts from Vienna that month were his first. He had no formal news background or training. Those broadcasts were models of careful, accurate journalism. When people say that Ed Murrow was born to do what he did in life, that first month in Vienna may be taken in evidence.

And so that was how it all began. By some miracle, it seems to me, the time and the place and the man came together. The birth of serious broadcast journalism can be said to be Ed Murrow's radio reports from Vienna in 1938. It was a long way from Polecat Creek, by way of Puget Sound logging camps and international student meetings—but he got there in time.

Many people in this room remember what followed. Night after night, "This is London." Thirty years ago this month:

Christmas Day began nearly an hour ago. The church bells did not ring at midnight. When they ring again, it will be to announce invasion. . . . This is not a merry Christmas in London. This afternoon . . . one heard such phrases as, "So long, Mamie," and "Goodnight, Jack," but never, "A merry Christmas." It can't be a merry Christmas, for those people who spend tonight and tomorrow by their firesides in their own homes realize that they have bought this Christmas with their nerve, their bodies and their old buildings. . . . I should like to add my small voice to give my own Christmas greeting to friends and colleagues at home. Merry Christmas is somehow ill-timed and out of place, so I shall just use the current London phrase, goodnight, and good luck.

And that was how the phrase originated, the one with which he was to close his broadcasts after the war.

It was after the war that he made his greatest contributions to broadcasting, in my opinion, and to his country. If you doubt that he spoke to the enduring issues, or that his clear voice is needed now, in this day, then listen to some of the words he said. Remember, for example, the recent attack of Vice-President Agnew upon the news media. Murrow was not around to answer him. He answered him in 1945:

Our system of broadcasting . . . is loud, occasionally vulgar . . . and not always right. But the man who is wrong has his chance to be heard. There is much

controversy and debate, and some special pleading, but frequently the phonies are found out. There is no conspiracy to keep the listener in ignorance, and government does not guide the listening or thinking of the people. There is much talk, and you may think that it only contributes to confusion. . . . A loud voice that reaches from coast to coast is not necessarily uttering truths more profound than those that may be heard in the classroom, bar or country store. But there they are. You can listen, or leave them alone. . . . [We] must hold a mirror behind the nation and the world. If the reflection shows racial intolerance, economic inequality, bigotry, unemployment or anything else, let the people see it. . . . The mirror must have no curves, and must be held with a steady hand.

If you doubt that Ed Murrow saw things clearly and often perceived the heart of a matter somewhat sooner than his countrymen, listen to what he said about Indochina in 1954:

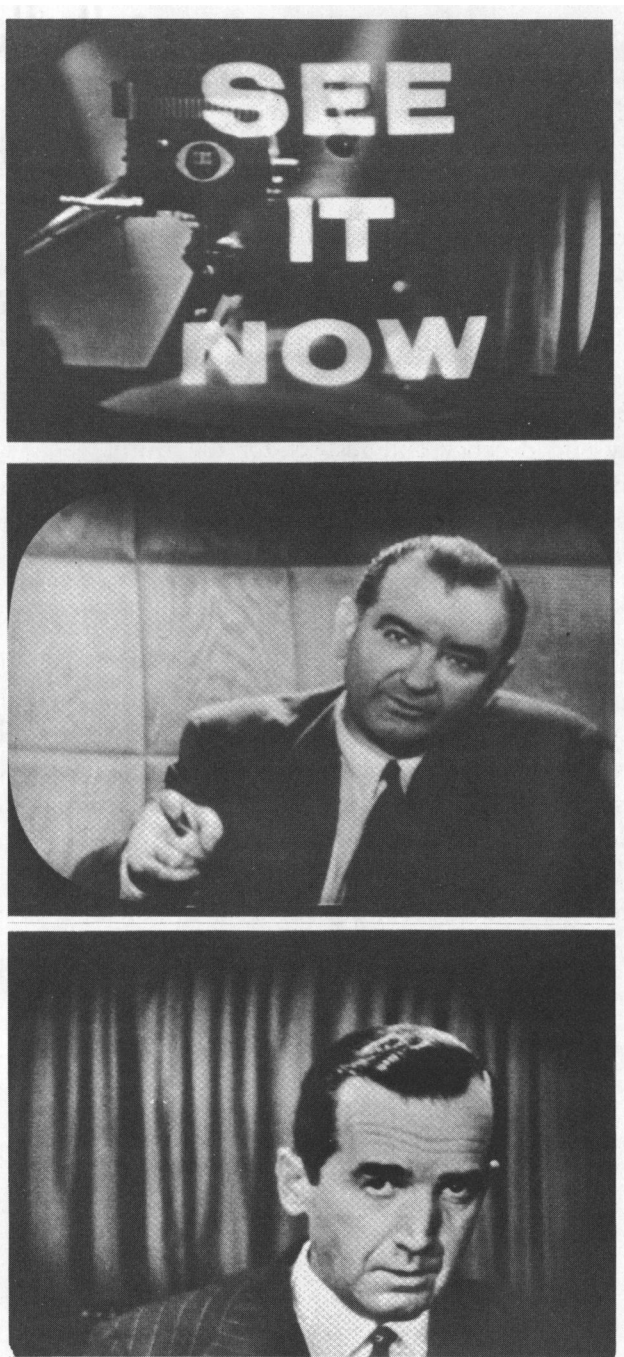
Advocates of intervention are unrealistic if they assume that the problem in Indo-China is primarily military. Actually, it is much more political. The victory in Indo-China is not to be won by more foreign ground troops or guns, be they French or American. . . . It is not to be won by the capture of strongpoints. The Vietminh have no strongpoints. It is to be won first of all in the realm of convictions. Only if the people of Indo-China believe that the fight against Communists is the fight for their own freedom will they turn the present tide of the conflict.

And when you hear new phrases like "stop and frisk," "no-knock laws," and "preventive detention," you might remember some older words. Murrow sixteen years ago:

We must, for our very lives, remember that freedom will reside and flourish here in this generous and capacious land, or it will survive nowhere on this minor planet. . . . Nations have been known to destroy their freedom while preparing to defend it. . . . Too many people have mistakenly thought it was necessary to be undemocratic to deal with the emergency. They have thought there wasn't time to be both safe and free. No more fateful mistake can be made. . . . For if we emerge from the long crisis undevastated by total war but no longer free, we have but chosen the cheapest and least heroic way to give tyranny the victory.

Ed Murrow's inquiring mind led him to do his great documentary, "Harvest of Shame," years before the national conscience was aroused to any kind of war on poverty. . . . He was the first on network television to report on cigarettes and lung cancer, years before the surgeon general's first report on that subject. And after the national political campaign we have all just lived through, it may cleanse your soul to hear the words he spoke on March 9, 1954, the night of his "See It Now" broadcast devoted to Senator Joseph McCarthy. He might have been moved to say them again in 1970:

We will not walk in fear, one of another. We will not be driven by fear into an age of unreason if we dig deep in our history and our doctrine and remember that



Murrow's "See It Now" fought bigotry and oppression. The CBS photographs reproduced here show Murrow and Senator Joseph R. McCarthy, whose name became synonymous with demagoguery. The word "McCarthyism" was coined as a result of the senator's widely publicized attacks on individuals, particularly when elements he deemed subversive were involved, though often the charges were unsubstantiated. Photographs from Kendrick, *Prime Time*, 58.

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we are not descended from fearful men, not from men who feared to write, to speak, to associate and to defend causes which were for the moment unpopular. . . . The actions of the junior senator from Wisconsin have caused alarm and dismay. . . . And whose fault is that? Not really his; he didn't create this situation of fear; he merely exploited it, and rather successfully. Cassius was right. "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars but in ourselves."

He died in the spring, five years ago, before his time. His ashes were scattered at his farm in Pawling, New York. But to me, he will always belong to Guilford County. I am southerner enough to believe that there really is something born into a man that helps determine what he will become, and if that is so, then there was a century of good earth and hard work and woods and creeks and wild flowers born into Edward R. Murrow. And a Scotch-Irish and English Quaker dignity and decency and respect for the truth.

At his death, he had been director of the United States Information Agency and an adviser to presidents and prime ministers. He was holder of fourteen honorary degrees and all the prizes of his profession, honorary Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire, Chevalier of the Legion of Honor, an officer of the Order of Leopold.

But we don't remember him for his honors. We remember him, finally, for his deep and abiding belief that we could take it; that there was never any excuse for insulating the people from reality; that escapism was the eighth, and deadliest sin; that the American people were wise beyond the comprehension of those who would trick us or delude us or tell us lies; that we were decent and responsible and mature and could be counted on every time if only we could be supplied our fair measure of the straight facts.

We don't remember him for his honors. We remember him for how he honored us.