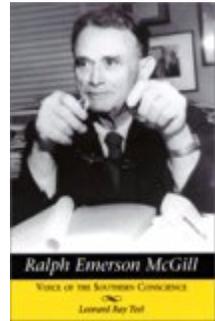


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Leonard Ray Teel. *Ralph Emerson McGill: Voice of the Southern Conscience*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2001. xx + 559 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-57233-135-8; \$50.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-57233-133-4.

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Published on H-Tennessee (July, 2004)



Ralph McGill: Spokesman of the South

In this lengthy and detailed biography, Leonard Ray Teel, associate professor of communications at Georgia State University, documents the life and career of Ralph McGill. From atop his spokesman's perch at the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, McGill garnered a reputation as the leading newspaperman of the South's leading city. He combined an easygoing story-telling style in folksy columns with a willingness to broach the subject of the South's tumultuous race relations during the civil rights era. As an ambassador of sorts for Dixie, he was often the first source when the *New York Times* needed a moderate Southern perspective on race relations. His own relationship with his readers remained more varied. Hated by racial extremists, well-connected among politicians (both Georgia and nationally), and read regularly by just about everybody from this period, his legacy looms large in Southern journalism.

The biography opens with a restless McGill, bored with his early career in sportswriting, hungering for weightier issues to grapple with in his writings. Traveling to Cuba in 1933, he scored an exclusive interview with President Gerardo Machado that whetted this appetite and gave him an early glimpse of journalistic glory. Teel uses this episode to set up the argument that these impulses drove McGill for the rest of his career, particularly in McGill's later reputation as "the conscience of the South" regarding racial issues in the post-Brown era (p. xix). Focusing squarely on McGill's career ascendance, Teel works backward in time, feeding in background and biographical details on McGill when appropriate. He

touches on McGill's early life, his family and relationships, his enrollment at Vanderbilt University and early writings for the *Nashville Banner*.

Appropriately, Teel spends more time on the issue with which McGill became most identified: the integration question of the 1950s and 1960s. Teel says McGill evinced little interest in race relations in the 1930s and 1940s. His early sympathies dwelt instead with tenant farmers (an issue that provided some entry into academic circles sharing similar concerns) and correlated to some sort of sympathy with the common man. Moreover, McGill's travels to Europe in the late-1930s instilled in him a profound wariness of the latent potential for tyranny in human societies. Thus prompted by the enormous upheaval provoked by the civil rights movement, McGill had reason to seize on civil rights as an issue that triggered his intellectual sympathies, while also serving his desire for status and recognition.

The context of the 1950s and 1960s allowed McGill to be lauded as the "voice of the Southern conscience," as this book's subtitle denotes. Teel is careful to qualify that reputation, stressing that McGill had the "attitude of a teacher and the aim of a reformer" and that his career "became a model for a social reformer willing to risk hostility and isolation to break the 'spiral of silence' in public opinion" (pp. xv-xvi). But Teel also acknowledges that McGill was "seldom far ahead of his readers" and was "persuaded by friends and institutions against going too far ahead of his white flock" (p. xix). All these pithy quo-

tations are taken from Teel's introduction, and while they display the careful balance of his argument, he provides no sustained analysis of them or of McGill's popular treatise, "The South and the Southerner." While Teel renders the context of Atlanta race relations adequately, he does little to advance the conversation about what McGill's moderate stance meant for the larger historical picture.

In the end, then, the strengths of this biography are many. Foremost is the contextualization brought to McGill's life and career. The author portrays effectively both the political and social context of Atlanta in which McGill worked, and he is even better at placing McGill against the backdrop of his journalism profession. In some ways, the book functions most effectively as a his-

tory of journalism in this era. Moreover, Professor Teel has a gift for nicely turned phrases that are often pleasant surprises for the reader. These positives are partially undone by the occasional repetitive details that sag the narrative along with multiple unclear or awkward passages. But the balance and connections between the personal and professional facets of McGill's life are well-struck, and the author does a good job of capturing McGill the man, with his ego, faults, fondness for drink, and love of political strategy, and McGill as emblematic of the Southern moderate voice. "There is room for debate about McGill's place in the great movement for civil rights in the segregated South," Teel acknowledges, and so there still is (p. xix).

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