

A STUDENT'S NOTES, 1950 - 1953: MR. JUSTICE WILLIAM F. RYAN AS PROFESSOR

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Whether born to be a teacher or not, William F. Ryan was an effective one. His effectiveness stemmed from a decision he had apparently made to lead us into the paths of legal knowledge, perhaps even despite ourselves.

Coupled with his pedagogical objective was of course his methodology. As a first step he would present an early exploration of the topic under discussion. His questioning would follow – very individual questioning as we were a small class – on the materials previously assigned in preparation for the day. He would attempt to elicit from us our own understanding of the materials so studied. Then, in a rather matter-of-fact but firm way, he would correct any misunderstandings, leaving no doubt as to the latest statement on the subject.

A primary meaning of the word “pedagogue” is *teacher*. A secondary meaning of the word found in Webster’s College Dictionary is “a person who is pedantic, dogmatic, and formal”. One could not accuse him of falling into this latter definition. While careful in his approaches to legal topics he was not pedantic. Though he endeavoured to be as precise as possible in his expositions of legal principles he also offered possible alternative views and could therefore not be called dogmatic. Formal? Only to the point of providing a useful base from which to consider the serious matters at hand. A pedagogue he was – in the first and best sense.

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He was a person inclined to thought. It was apparent in his careful choice of words, and his deliberate approach to a topic. Through example he inspired us as students to exert ever greater efforts to master the subtleties of legal principles – an inspiration tinged for us with a sense of futility, knowing that we would not be likely to attain the depth of his knowledge.

And yet, humour. In a classroom moment in the old Provincial Building in Saint John, when grasping legal principles respecting real property took precedence over outside events, he brought those events into play. A popular song of the time, “What is this thing called Love?”, provided the link. He struck a usual and for him a natural pose: one foot on the floor, the other placed on the seat of an empty chair. Looking first out the window with arms crossed on his raised knee, he turned to the class, grinned, and posed the question: “What is this

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thing called Property?" Could our learned professor have known of the existence of the current song? He of the serious mien and strong intellect? The grin revealed all. He did.

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He liked the ballet. It may not be overstating to say that at this time of his life he loved it. One had only to mention the topic – outside of class, of course – and he could be counted on for an extended and a knowledgeable discussion on many of its aspects. One day, while walking together along one of Saint John's commercial streets, the subject of ballet was raised. It may have been in connection with a recent showing of the movie, *The Red Shoes*. He offered spirited comment while we continued our walk. In emphasizing his remarks and without realizing it he crowded ever closer until I, who was on the "inside" next to the buildings past which we were walking, felt my shoulder beginning to rub against their rough brick and granite. It was only with some tactful difficulty that my jacket shoulder was spared being shredded. Such enthusiasm for his subject!

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I recall an article I was preparing for insertion in the next *UNB Law Journal* of the year. It was an honour to be asked to contribute, of course, but some hard digging and writing had to be engaged before it would be acceptable to the *Journal* editors. The topic, "The Innkeeper's Guest", was not likely to attract the undivided attention of the Supreme Court of Canada, or of any other body. It might receive only a cursory glance from the profession. However, a commitment was a commitment.

Our property professor made a generous offer to oversee my work on the article. As a veteran of history essays during my Bachelor of Arts days there was some pride of literary craftsmanship in the first draft submitted to him. The draft came back with *many* markings on it. A second draft underwent the same treatment. Subsequent drafts – the actual number is forgotten – had many, although different, comments appended. Ultimately, a draft was prepared that was acceptable (just) to the professor and that was printed by the *Journal*.

But whose article was it in the end? My professor's, or mine? In a show of academic generosity the professor claimed no printed or other credit for collaboration, but *I* knew that without that collaboration the quality of the article would have been substantially less.

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Today, as a law professor myself, I am often exhorting my students to remember their ABCs when expressing themselves legally. They are to recall these ABCs especially when engaging in legal writing, but the ABC concept is of course equally applicable to spoken thoughts on legal subjects. The ABCs to which reference is made are Accuracy, Brevity and Clarity.

In what may have been his last extensive video interview before his death, our professor showed himself to have mastered well these ABC attributes. His speech and actions in the interview may be aptly, and respectfully, described as “vintage Ryan”. He was accurate in his facts and thoughts; there was a brevity in his remarks that did not sacrifice content; and he was clear in his presentation of the aims he had for the Law School. There was no mistaking the high standards he had set for the School. It can be said of him that he epitomized those standards in his own conduct as professor.