

## OBITUARIES

### E.B. White, at 86; prize-winning essayist and author

By Edgar J. Driscoll Jr.  
Globe Staff

E.B. White, an illustrious essayist and storyteller and a leading contributor to The New Yorker magazine for more than half a century, died yesterday in his home in West Brooklin, Maine. He was 86.

J. Russell Wiggins, publisher of the weekly Ellsworth American and a longtime friend and Brooklin neighbor, told The Associated Press that the author and humorist had suffered from Alzheimer's disease for about a year and that his condition had worsened steadily.

"A few months ago he said he had so much to tell and so little time to tell it," Wiggins said.

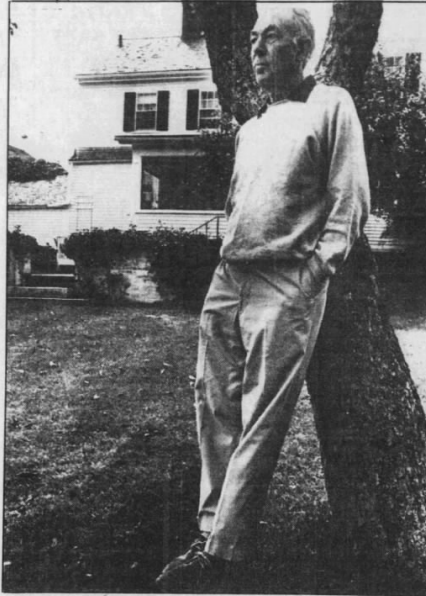
Once called "a headwaiter of clear thinking," Mr. White had been telling it as it is in his quiet, gentle, unassuming way for decades. He was a master of the English language whose commentaries on the American scene were filled with common sense.

#### Collection of classics

Rebellion is in nearly all of his essays, collected in such books — long considered classics — as "Second Tree from the Corner," "One Man's Meat" and "The Points of My Compass." But as one critic noted: "It is rebellion with neither scathe nor sweat, so that what is rebelled against is not shaped by the wild wrath of the protester's emotions but by his controlled logic, always the the deadliest of weapons."

Of his seemingly effortless work, Mr. White once said he wrote "by ear, always with difficulty and seldom with any exact notion of what is taking place under the hood."

Many awards came his way. In 1963 he received the Presidential Medal of Freedom, which President John F. Kennedy wanted



Author E. B. White at his home in Maine in the 1970s

him to go to Washington to receive. Mr. White, who had a passion for privacy and never made public appearances or addresses, declined. Instead, he wrote the president a warm letter, asking to be excused from public hoopla but thanking him for the honor.

In 1978, at age 79, he received a special Pulitzer Prize "for the full body of his work." In addition to his essays, he wrote books for adults and children — including another classic, "Charlotte's Web" — as well as a manual on prose style, which introduced more than a generation of would-be writers to the difference between clear writing and fuzzy thinking.

A slender man of medium height with close-cropped hair and a neatly trimmed mustache, the author also held the Gold Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Laura Ingalls Wilder Award for children's books and, in 1971, the Medal for Literature of the National Book Committee, which lauded him for "the perfection of his prose; for his keen eye, wry optimism and lucid style."

#### "An act of faith"

On receiving the National Book Committee award, Mr. White said at the time: "Writing is an act of faith, nothing else. And it must be the writer, above all others, who keeps it alive — choked with laughter or with pain."

Mr. White had been associated with The New Yorker from its

staff. For many years he wrote the essays in the magazine's "Notes and Comment" section, thereby setting the tone of the magazine. At The New Yorker he shared a tiny office with his friend James Thurber, writing some captions for Thurber's spare but hilarious cartoons. He also edited parts of the "Talk of the Town" section and often wrote about local and national politics for it.

Mr. White was born Elwyn Brooks White in Mount Vernon, N.Y., on July 11, 1899, the son of Samuel Tilly White and Jessie (Hart) White. He graduated from Mount Vernon public schools and, after Army service in World War I, from Cornell University in 1921.

After graduation he and a friend drove west in a Model T Ford. Mr. White spent a year as a reporter with the Seattle Times before shipping out as a mess boy on a ship sailing to the Aleutians and the Arctic.

He moved to New York a year later, and spent the next two years working for an advertising agency. When The New Yorker was founded in 1925, he contributed sketches, stories and poems, and the following year joined the staff at the invitation of its legendary editor, Harold Ross.

In 1929 he married the magazine's first fiction editor, Katharine Sergeant Angell. In 1937 the couple moved to a 160-year-old white clapboard farmhouse beside the sea in this northern Maine town, and he began submitting

material to Harper's magazine. Thus began the column, "One Man's Meat," which ran until 1943. He also contributed to the Atlantic.

In 1945 he resumed writing for The New Yorker, which he continued to do for more than 30 years. These contributions included witty "newsbreaker fillers" with which he sprinkled the bottom of pages under such headings as "How's That Again?," "Letters We Never Finished Reading," "Neatest Trick of the Week" and "Go Climb a Tree Department." These were published in books called "Ho Hum" and "Another Ho Hum," which he edited.

#### First book in 1929

Mr. White began publishing his works in book form in 1929. The first, "The Lady is Cold," was poetry and was followed by "Is Sex Necessary?" in collaboration with Thurber. It was a satire on pseudo-scientific sex literature.

His children's books included "Stuart Little," about a mouse born into a human family, and "Charlotte's Web," about a spider that saves a pig's life. Of the latter book, Mr. White once said its popularity had "kept me alive, been my bread and butter."

Other works include "Every Day is Saturday," "The Fox of Peapack," "Quo Vadimus," "The Wild Flag," "Here is New York," "The Trumpet of the Swan," "Letter of E.B. White," "Essays of E.B. White" and "Poems and Sketches of E.B. White." With his wife, he also was editor of "A Subtreasury of American Humor."

His 1959 revision of "The Elements of Style," originally written by his Cornell English teacher, William Strunk Jr., is considered a basic text on grammatical usage and composition. Its advice on usage, composition, form and style in writing is considered unequalled for conciseness and correctness. In the last chapter of the book, called "An Approach to Style," Mr. White wrote:

"Style takes its final shape more from attitudes of mind than from principles of composition, for, as an elderly practitioner once remarked, 'Writing is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar.'"

Mr. White held honorary degrees from Yale, Harvard and Cornell universities; the University of Maine; and Dartmouth, Bowdoin, Hamilton and Colby colleges.

He was a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and a member of the National Institute of Arts and Letters, the American Academy of Arts and Letters and Phi Gamma Delta.

Mr. White, whose wife died in 1977, leaves a son, Joel White of Brooklin; his stepson, Roger Angell of New York City, a writer at The New Yorker; a stepdaughter, Nancy (Angell) Stableford of Easton, Pa.; nine grandchildren and 10 great-grandchildren.

A memorial service is planned at a date to be announced.

### Charles Hoffman, 59

#### Lynn Item sports editor

SWAMPSCOTT — Charles J. (Red) Hoffman, executive sports editor of the Lynn Item the last 25 years, died yesterday morning in Union Hospital here after a brief illness. He was 59.

Holder of numerous writing awards, Mr. Hoffman had covered and written feature articles on Boston's professional teams and about all types of sporting events in the Greater Lynn and North Shore areas.

Mr. Hoffman was a Lynn native and a graduate of St. Joseph's Institute and of St. Mary's High School in Lynn in 1943. He also graduated from Burdett and Emerson colleges.

Before joining the Item staff in 1960, he was sports editor of the Telegram-News in Lynn.

He was a member of the Knights of Columbus in Lynn, the Baseball Writers of America Assn., and the American Newspaper Guild.