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## Complete reporter, scrupulous editor

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### Abstract:

Bill Caldwell was the most knowledgeable and eminent newspaperman of his times and was a recipient of the Pulitzer Prize for commentary. Caldwell had to discontinue education due to the untimely death of his father and his talents were self-taught. Although he had written 12,000 columns, his thoughts were always young and fresh till he retired and died in the year 1986.

### Full Text:

I CAN HARDLY BELIEVE that we've marked 20 years since Bill Caldwell's retirement as editorial page editor of The Record, New Jersey's largest evening newspaper, and 22 years since he won the Pulitzer Prize for commentary. He died in 1986, but his spirit hovers over me every time I sit down to write.

Bill was the most complete reporter and the most scrupulous editor a whole generation of journalists ever met. His capacity for work was mythical. He'd arrive five days a week to supervise a staff of five, write two editorials and a column, lay out two pages, and still have time to edit the copy of his stable of writers before he went home.

Caldwell's precise, clear copy was written on odd sheets. Sometimes his pieces were done on long rolls of Teletype paper. Sometimes they were on ruled pages torn from a looseleaf composition book. Always, the words were set down without an excision, an x-ing out, or without a single overprint. His daily column was kept to 85 lines. His mind was so attuned that he would come to a halt exactly at 85 lines, thoughts and arguments complete.

The printer of a collection of Caldwell's columns called to ask how he should measure the 160 chosen columns. He was told they were exactly the same length. He called back a few days later, awe in his voice, to confirm that, yes, indeed, all were exactly the same length.

William A. Caldwell was the best self-educated man I knew. He had to leave high school at 15 when his father, an Associated Press reporter, died; Bill, the eldest, went to work to help support his family. He played the organ in a church, played semi-professional baseball, and did odd jobs until he landed a post as a sportswriter on The Record at 19. Before four years had passed, he was editorial page editor, and for the next 44 years cranked out an extraordinary amount of pungent copy.

"When I was transferred from sports to the editorial page," said Caldwell, "I guess, I dealt with politics the way a sportswriter would, as if it was all a game, the name of which was Who Gets, What. I soon learned differently."

Caldwell became a force in local, county, and state government. He was considered the most knowledgeable newspaperman of his generation. He read voluminously, and absorbed everything he read, from the complete five-foot shelf of Dr. Eliot's famous books to the most obscure Greek and Roman classics.

Bill Caldwell, his brother Bob often said, was a sage at 17.

"It was easy. All he had to do was learn to write beautifully by the time he was 15 and along with that learn that you'll never write as well as you ought to, and at the same time learn to be a crack football and baseball player, and be a fine piano and organ player."

Caldwell's editorials talked directly to the reader. They explained, condemned, counseled, pointed an accusing finger, peeled layers of cant from a problem. They always offered solutions.

"It isn't enough," he would tell colleagues, "to state a problem. You must propose a solution."

His solutions were forthright, compounded of old-fashioned common sense, a deep Christian ethic, a profound understanding of the

human heart, and a currency with affairs. Sometimes, his critics were wont to say, Caldwell could be too fair. Sins were enumerated, never judged, until they were resolved in a court of law. Once judged, however, fraud was fair game. Few could flail as deftly as Bill Caldwell.

Caldwell never went to college. That didn't prevent his being awarded an honorary LL.D. by Rutgers University.

In Chicago, at the 1968 Democratic National Convention, Bill, by then a grandfather, was on the job as reporter and commentator. Reporters half his age would gaze in awe as their 61-year-old colleague wrote reams of crisp, complete, colorful copy, full of insights it took others days to arrive at.

His talents were all self-taught: reading and playing music, cooking like Escoffier, and advising others. Young people preferred to spend time in his company than with most of their contemporaries. He appreciated. He encouraged. He always had time for a word of counsel.

And in all that time, he wrote 12,000 columns. It took me two years to decide on the finest 160 to be included in a book.

"When Bill came to The Record," said his brother Bob, "he was the youngest member of the staff."

When Bill retired at 65, he still was.

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