

The News-Gazette

Former UI professor was always a legal scholar

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A few weeks ago, a postcard arrived in The News-Gazette newsroom that was more marketing device than missive.

Its cover featured a portrait of John Marshall, the longest serving (1801-1835) chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court.

The jurist was a towering figure in the early life of this nation, who helped define the high court's role as the final arbiter of the meaning of the U.S. Constitution. The postcard served as an announcement of a new biography entitled "John Marshall and the Cases that United the States of America."

This book is strictly for brainiacs — readers of bodice rippers need not bother.

The author is Ronald Rotunda, among many other things, a longtime and highly distinguished former professor of constitutional law at the University of Illinois.

"Professor Rotunda has breathed new life into Beveridge's history of John Marshall, bringing context, understanding and readability to the life and legacy of our fourth Chief Justice in a brilliant abridged work," the postcard states.

At 642 pages, it is an abridged version of a four-volume Marshall biography, one that readers of history find to their liking.

"I have had a strong interest in early American history all my life. This book fits the bill. It is briskly written in a clear and friendly prose, well organized, rich in content, profound in insight and filled with many thought-provoking vignettes. It is nothing less than a masterly work of scholarship, an important book, one that is so well-written that it reads like a page-turner," said one.

Unfortunately, Rotunda's book on Marshall is his last contribution to history and commentary on the law. He died March 14 at age 73 after a short hospital stay, apparently a victim of pneumonia.

Funeral services were held Monday at St. Norbert Catholic Church in Orange, Calif.

After his death, tributes poured in from present and former colleagues, representatives of the Cato Institute and the Heritage Foundation, and even from John Dean, the White House counsel under President Nixon, whose testimony about the Watergate scandal blew the case wide open.

"It is difficult to believe this brilliant dynamo of legal scholarship, wonderful erudition and wily wit is gone. But his impact will remain, and it will affect all practicing American lawyers, if not more, for untold decades," Dean wrote in an article for the legal web site, justia.com.

Surely one of the most distinguished members ever of the UI law faculty, Rotunda joined the UI in 1974 after graduating from Harvard Law School and then serving on the U.S. Senate committee investigating the Watergate scandal.

Years later — in the late 1990s — he served as an adviser to Ken Starr, the former federal judge and special counsel who led the investigation that led to the impeachment of former President Bill Clinton. Among other things, he helped write the report Starr's office submitted to Congress.

A diminutive figure who liked to wear bow ties and drove a Rolls Royce, Professor Rotunda possessed a dry, but wicked, sense of humor. Further, he didn't spend all his time writing on the law.

In one of his best known articles, this one for The Wall Street Journal, Professor Rontunda wrote about "The Boston Strangler, The Classroom and Me."

For those unfamiliar with the case, "The Boston Strangler" was Albert DeSalvo, the man identified by Massachusetts authorities as the killer of 11 women between 1962 and 1964.

Defense lawyer F. Lee Bailey handled the case and went on to fame and fortune.

DeSalvo ended up in a prison where Rotunda, then a Harvard undergraduate, taught rhetoric to inmates.

He described DeSalvo as one of his best and most attentive students, "the only one who would help me arrange the chairs for class."

He also noted that DeSalvo was comfortable talking to strangers, showing a "relaxed and gregarious" manner that he must have used to talk his way into his victims' homes.

"He looked normal. What was so abnormal was his mind," said Rotunda, pointing out that "you can't judge a book by its cover."

In addition to hundreds of articles, he also co-authored a five-volume treatise on constitutional law with his UI colleague John Nowak, authored books on legal ethics and provided legal opinions on vexing issues to the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee.

Professor Rotunda said he left the UI because, for pension reasons, he couldn't afford to stay. He taught at the George Mason University law school in Virginia before moving to California to teach at the Chapman University law school in Orange, where he had a variety of fruit trees (orange, peach and lemon) in his yard.

He said he loved living in Orange, even though he described the state of California as being "run like Somalia." But, mostly, he said he worked, getting up at 5 a.m. every day to go to the office because he said he was "having too much fun to retire."