

Notes on Herbert Elliston

May 6, 1982

Herbert Elliston came to The Washington Post on Oct. 17, 1940, following the resignation of Felix Morley. He was given the title of associate editor. Eugene Meyer was editor and publisher.

Merlo Pussey, then a writer on the page, and associate editor when he retired in 1971, summed up Elliston's role. He said, in his biography of Meyer that Elliston: "would guide the editorial policy of the paper for 13 years, with skill, foresight and dashes of brilliance".

Felix Morley, Elliston's predecessor, and Eugene Meyer had begun to disagree over foreign policy. Morley decided to accept an offer to be president of a boy's school and picked Elliston whom he had met in China, to succeed him. Elliston and Meyer were in total agreement on the world situation, and they developed a warm collaboration. Elliston, who had been in Asia for ten years, and who was on the Christian Science Monitor after that, was a well informed financial authority and this expertise cemented his friendship with Meyer.

Chalmers Roberts, who wrote the history of the Post's first 100 years, said Elliston arrived with: "his editorial pen afire". Within a week he had penned a memorable editorial on intervention and preparedness entitled: "It's later than you think". From then

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on, the Post editorial page prodded the Roosevelt administration to move farther and faster, supporting Lend Lease, the destroyer deal, and the rest of the apparatus of involvement.

Once the United States was in the war, the Post editorial page focused on the conduct of the war with vigorous editorials. After the surrender of Germany, Elliston turned to the Pacific war. On May 9, 1945 he wrote an editorial which criticized unconditional surrender which he said was not an ideal formula to get peace. He urged the President to let the Japanese know what they must do to stop the war. The editorial, really aimed at Japan, aroused much interest. He returned to the theme in an editorial on May 19. Thereafter, Capt. Ellis Zacharias of the Navy wrote a letter to the Post signed "Constant Reader" in which he said the Japanese could find out the kind of surrender America wanted by reading the Atlantic Charter, the Cairo Declaration and the Potsdam Declaration. Elliston hailed the Potsdam statement as a: "stroke of high statesmanship",

Both on the editorial page, and through his numerous contacts with officials of government, Elliston labored to develop the national consensus on foreign policy that lasted until the Vietnam War. He was one of the architects of allied collaborative efforts.

After a stroke and a heart attack, he went into semi-retirement in the spring of 1953. Walter Lippman then wrote that: "he had the true genius of the great editor". He had won the Pulitzer Award for editorial writing in 1949. He had the title of editor after June of 1946, when Eugene Meyer left the paper for the World Bank.

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Elliston was born in Yorkshire. He served in the British Armed forces in World War I and did not relish his military experience, but in spite of it was objective about the military in the United States. He and James Forrestal, the first Secretary of Defense, were close friends and Elliston knew and conferred with the top military leaders. He was fond of the quotation: "Defense comes before opulence".

Elliston wrote all his editorials in long hand — and it was a long hand that few could read. His secretary, Virginia Wagner, became an expert and so did his colleague Robert Estabrook who had to struggle over his handwritten notes on proofs. The First World War had interrupted his formal education, but he read widely all his life and had an amazingly retentive memory. Estabrook, who succeeded him on the editorial page, described him as: "one of the best-educated persons I ever met".

In his home, he was a delightful host and shown brilliantly in discussions of politics and economics. He loved good food, good drink, and good conversation.

He thought the Truman administration yielded too much to McCarthy and Nixon on loyalty fights and so strongly criticized Dean Acheson that their personal friendship was affected. His best friends on the hill included Representatives Joseph Casey and Christian Herter and Senator Saltonstall.

While he supported the use of the atom bomb, he came to regret it and felt the war already won without it. The China lobby bugged him and he always mistrusted Chiang Kai-shek. He was worried about American involvement in Indo China at the start.

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He was a newspaperman's newspaperman and his strongest friendships were within his profession where he was widely esteemed for his craftsmanship and for his gift of friendship. He was so wrapped up in the great issues with which he dealt on the page and about which he thought every waking moment that he was often delightfully absentminded about everything else. His family fondly recalled that his preoccupation limited his mechanical aptitude. (He once drove the family car entirely in second gear on a long vacation trip and was astonished at the way the motor heated.) His sneezes were a notable phenomenon of the Fifth Floor and once started could not be stopped short of their programmed nine explosions. His pipe was a piece of him. There was about him, all his life, the whiff of his tobacco and the whiff of Yorkshire.

Those who worked long with him must all regret frequently his early retirement following his illness. His reactions to the events of the decades after his death would have been interesting. The Washington Post went forward from the beginnings he helped to make, and it is too bad he could not have shared in the future he helped to shape, and that he did not get to contribute his judgment and influence in the turbulent times that followed his death.