

John Egerton  
Written by Paul Clements

John Egerton died early on the morning of November 21, 2013. We had talked briefly the night before, and here's what he would have probably said if he had known what was coming. "Now I don't want you making a big deal out of this. I've had a damn good run. I want you to promise that you won't go wasting your time on some eulogy." That's pretty much what he would've said, but it might not have bothered him too much if I wrote something for people who never got to meet him. So that's what this is meant to be – an introduction.

I think it's accurate to say that John was as widely beloved as anyone who ever lived in Nashville. I expect that the experience of first meeting him was pretty much the same for everybody. There was his intense eye contact as he was taking you in. When he told you he was glad to meet you, you'd find out, over time, how much he meant it. He seemed to be looking for whoever you were at your core. He wanted to know your story, and once he knew it he would remember it. The next time you saw him, he might ask you to elaborate on something you'd told him the time before, and the process would continue from there.

When you met John Egerton you would have the impression that he was deeply authentic, and after you'd known him awhile you might suspect that he was the most authentic person you'd ever met. And the longer you knew him the more you'd be struck by his thoughtfulness and humility and the level of caring he displayed. It was the same with his intellect and his discernment, and with his integrity and his courage. All those qualities came together in John.

He had a compulsion to be forthright, which meant that he had a lot to say to the world. John wrote hundreds of essays and articles, and there were his books: *A Mind to Stay Here* (1970), *The Americanization of Dixie* (1974), *Visions of Utopia* (1977), *Nashville: The Faces of Two Centuries* (1979), *Generations: An American Family* (1983), *Southern Food* (1987), *Shades of Gray* (1991), *Speak Now Against the Day* (1994), and *Ali Dubyah and the Forty Thieves: A Contemporary Fable* (2006). When I think about all the writing John did, the first thing that comes to mind is John's deep and complicated relationship with the South.

There have always been plenty of Southerners who like to talk about how much they love the South, but the vast majority quietly acquiesced to the chronic loss of what was best about their home region. John wasn't one to acquiesce, and in *The Americanization of Dixie* he wrote how the South, as it became increasingly homogenized with the more negative aspects of American culture, was losing the best of what it was. Of all the subjects to which he devoted himself, there was nothing about which John was more passionate than matters of race. He spent six years of his life on his masterpiece, *Speak Now Against the Day*, which focused on race relations in the South during the years prior to the decision of the Supreme Court in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*. There were those who had tried to address racial inequity with voices of fairness and reason, and he told the stories of how those voices were drowned out by the backward but powerful confederation that rallied behind self-serving demagogues posing as leaders.

As his connection with the South had grown deeper, he investigated the way black people in the region had been treated. As a result of his investigations, John had gained an intricate knowledge of the injustices suffered by black schoolchildren through generations of being denied the opportunity to achieve their full potential. He had heard the stories of black veterans who had risked their lives for their country, only to be denied a place to eat or spend the night as they tried to get back home after their service in World War Two. He had researched the lynchings, and many of the other legal and economic and social sins that had been committed along the way. And having watched the way that generations of southerners had shrugged off such injustice, John's essential honesty had compelled him to basically say, "These things were wrong, and the wounds they caused aren't going away unless we own up to what happened, and unless we own up to the fact that most Southerners went along with what took place."

At the end of *Speak Now Against the Day* he described a man for whom he had great admiration - the noted columnist, Ralph McGill. John wrote that McGill “seemed in person much like he sounded on the printed page – well-mannered and charming, tough and tender, easygoing but serious, a good storyteller and a good listener, sentimental and softhearted but capable of indignant outrage, a gentle man with a sense of humor and a distant air of melancholy.” That sounds a lot like John Egerton, and a quote John included in the next-to-last paragraph of that book sounds like something John, who wasn’t much on backing down, would’ve said. It came from a speech that John heard McGill give in 1959. “There comes a time when you must stand and fight for what you believe, for what you know is right and true – or else tuck tail and run.”

In addition to such ground-breaking accomplishments as co-founding The Southern Foodways Alliance, there are a few other things you should know about John. One is that beyond the books and articles and essays he wrote, he did everything from give encouragement and advice to authors, to find publishers and spread the word once their books were written. As an advocate of local history, his efforts went well beyond writing *Nashville: The Faces of Two Centuries*, which turned the attention of his home city back to its own compelling but usually ignored story. He was also instrumental in seeing to it that the Metro Archives, a key part of the history infrastructure of the city, was not relocated to Hickory Hollow Mall - a move that many in the local history community felt would bring about the demise of the Archives. And John thought it was unacceptable that Nashville was the most substantial city in America without an institution devoted to presenting its history. He did as much as he could to push for the establishment of a local history museum. If we ever get one, I can’t think of anyone better to name it after than John Egerton.

While you might not have met John, it isn’t too late to get to know him. His books are available, and if you read his prose, with its wonderful clarity and eloquence, you’ll get a deepening sense of what a gifted writer he was. When John signed my copy of *Speak Now Against the Day*, he included a note for my family. He wrote that we were all “sailing together on a voyage to everywhere. It all connects. With encouragement from a fellow traveler.” A few months ago John was working beside his house. He got separated from the ladder he was on, and he was seriously hurt in the fall he took. He was still in considerable pain several weeks later, and he finally consented to go to a local energy healer in search of some relief. He wasn’t sure whether he had dozed off, or if he had gone into a trance during the course of the treatment he had received. An hour or two later he described what he had experienced - “I was on the table, looking up at the ceiling. Then I was looking up at the stars. And then I was *in* the stars.” That is where I like to imagine he is – in the stars, still connected as the impact of his journey continues.