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Putting It in Writing: an Exalted Leader in London, by David J. Marcou

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There once was a journalist who spoke in exalted, very British tones, who knew how to write, edit, and act.

There once was a journalist who spoke in exalted, very British tones, who knew how to write, edit, and act. His name was John – John Hilary Whale, in fact – and he held many esteemed jobs over the years, including Religion Editor for the BBC and Editor of the (Anglican) Church Times. But the jobs of his that impressed me most were Chief Proofreader for the Sunday Times, and my teacher-editor in London.

John Whale was always busy with work, plus reading, theatre, dining, and physical exercise when he wasn't working, but he made time to instruct a group of fledgling reporters from the Missouri School of Journalism in autumn 1981,

and I was among that group, the 'Missouri Nine'.

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Mr. Whale monitored our freelance stories then, and edited them, too. He allowed us journalistic freedom, but made sure we didn't go too far off the track either. It helped to know that he and his wife, Judy, also acted in radio dramas; I'd studied theatre and history at UW-Madison. Their son, Toby, would eventually become

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Casting Director for the National Theatre of Britain. It was relevant, too, that Toby's grandfather, John S. Whale, had been a major theologian, and bishop in a nonconformist church. John Seldon Whale lived to be 100, though his son made 'just' 76.

In any case, my British teacher-editor, once wrote a series of articles about good English for the Sunday Times Magazine, which became his book 'Put It in Writing.' Mr. Whale had a thing about 'leaders', or in British journalism, the primary opinion page essay. He must have written a few over the years, because he performed a lot of jobs for his journalistic employers, and also, I know he liked plays on words, with himself being a leader to many young journalists, et. al.

John Whale was an exalted leader, and a reporter's reporter. He'd covered the masked men of the IRA, Pope John Paul II (in book-form), journalism, TV, and government (all in book-form), and Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan (though he was more of a Harold Wilson-man, I'd guess). And he'd arranged for housemate Pinki Virani to cover the gifts at Charles and Diana's Royal Wedding. In earlier days, he'd been acclaimed as King Lear on-stage, too.

While he was editing us, he also was politics and religion editor for the Sunday Times, and had taken on an added task with his wife, as that paper's chief proofreader. Mr. Whale was brilliant not only with English sounds and words, but with structure and meaning. And he knew American English well, too, which helped our group bridge the gap between the two leading forms of English. And he knew how to get work done during labor disputes.

Mr. Whale was also compassionate, despite the classical, stentorian tones of his voice, emerging from an average-size, balding frame. After retirement, the Whales would do summers in their Norman cottage, for they loved French architecture, history, and seascapes for swimming.

One day in 1981, there was an assignment written on Mr. Whale's desk for a Sunday Times photographer. I'd recently photographed a homeless man under Charing Cross Bridge. The staffer's assignment was to photograph there, too. I'd thought I should be published with words and photos in his paper, but that wasn't to be, at least not then. More on that in a future column.

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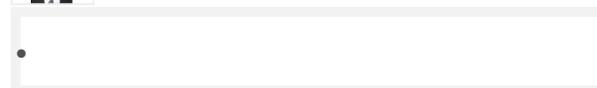
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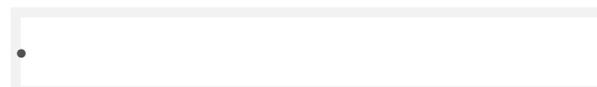
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