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W. GORDON JOHNSTON – THE GOOD LIFE



W. GORDON JOHNSTON

1903 - 1958

The following pages contain a memorial to Dean W. Gordon Johnston who died suddenly at Boulder, Colorado, on April 25, 1958. Dean Johnston served the University of Denver College of Law both faithfully and brilliantly as a law professor for twenty-six years and as dean of the law college for over ten years. But this was only one side of his rich

and varied service to his profession and his community. Because no one person ever can really know all the facets of a personality so rarely gifted yet so versatile as was his, the editors have asked a few of his myriad friends to contribute here their thoughts on some aspects of his life.

In addition, this issue of DICTA is dedicated with warm affection to the memory of Dean Johnston. He has many more enduring memorials. He himself, by his life and example, by his kindness, tact and wit, has built his own memorials. No perishable pyramids are these. He chose as their sites the immortal minds of men and built of the indestructible stuff of ideas and ideals. All of us whose lives have been enriched by having known Gordon Johnston know full well that his kindly and uplifting influence lives on.

But for those who may not have known Dean Johnston, and for those who knew him in only one or two of his many activities, it is hoped that these pages will make him better known.

THE EDITORS.

W. GORDON JOHNSTON — LEGAL EDUCATOR

Gordon Johnston's contribution to the advancement of legal education at the national level cannot be adequately measured in words alone. Nor could any extended recital, let alone a brief one such as this, do justice to the impact of his friendly and understanding personality, his discerning judgment, and his gracious willingness, on those many colleagues with whom he worked so unstintingly in improving the standards of training for the bar. As Acting Adviser to the Section on Legal Education of the American Bar Association in 1941 and 1942 he served admirably and well. As a member of the Executive Committee of the Association of American Law Schools in 1952, and as a member or chairman of many of that Association's other important committees during his twenty-six years as a legal educator, he will be always acknowledged as an effective leader and a generous participant. He was co-host to the law school association for its December 1951 meeting in Denver, and the officers and representatives who attended will long remember the fine program and hospitable entertainment arranged for them. Gordon Johnston's high principles, his executive ability, his scholarship, and his outstanding qualities as a teacher, have justly earned him an enduring niche in legal education's Hall of Fame.

SHELDEN D. ELLIOTT

*Director, Institute of Judicial Administration, Professor of Law,
New York University School of Law.*

W. GORDON JOHNSTON—COLLEAGUE AND FRIEND

Those of us who were fortunate enough to be associated with Gordon as fellow faculty members of the University of Denver College of Law and as personal friends enjoyed a rare and happy association with one in whom were merged, to an unusual degree, those qualities of genuine humanity and intellectual endowments which will make this association a cherished memory as long as we live. For Gordon was exceptional in these relationships, just as he was outstanding in his activities in every field of his many interests.

As the administrator of the affairs of the College of Law he enjoyed

the complete respect of his faculty and, what was, I am sure, even more important to him, he had their great affection and loyalty. He expected much of his faculty, but he gave much of himself—perhaps, as it turned out, too much. His reprimand, when deserved, was sharp, but I do not believe that it was ever given except after long deliberation and thorough investigation of the facts, and then reluctantly, for it was plain to us all that our affection for him was returned many fold. He had confidence in our interests in the affairs of the school and if he ever doubted the sincerity of our opinions and of our reasons for them we were never permitted to know it. But his sound judgment, based upon his keen intellect and his years of experience, furnished a reliable base for our discussions, and it was only rarely that we failed to reach a unanimous decision. His desire to preserve and promote the welfare of the faculty was always apparent to us and it is due to this fact that the faculty of the College of Law, through all the years, has remained a closely knit body, without jealousies and dedicated to the task of constantly improving and developing the school, so that today the long hoped for ideal of still greater service is about to be realized in a new law center. Gordon cherished the hope of completing this project and we feel a pang in our hearts in the knowledge that this cannot be. He will be missed and his place can never be filled completely, for his personality will be missing.

Gordon, the friend, will be remembered among a wide and varied group of people, drawn from those who had succeeded greatly in life, from those who were marked for success and from those whose contributions to life have been of a less brilliant sort. It is significant, however, that we all feel the same sense of the loss of a kindly and valued friend who saw no task too great if its performance would help someone else. His courtesy and kindness were unflinching. I have never known him to make anyone uncomfortable before others. He was incapable of doing so, for he loved people. His interests were broad and one felt at home with him immediately. In conversation he was brilliant and yet he was endowed with a certain humility and a fine talent of giving his entire attention to the immediate occasion. He had an easy grace in a group of any size, and this made conversation a pleasure and led it in far ranging courses. But with all of his gregariousness and love of man he could also be the quiet companion who delighted to share in the beauties of a great symphony, a fine poem or a work of art.

His candor and ingeniousness were disarming and always produced a feeling of warmth in one, a feeling that here was a fellow human being who, for all of his great talents, had those same little human virtues and faults that endear us to each other. Sensitive himself, he recoiled from injuring the feelings of others and I have known him to undergo an agony of spirit when he believed that he had unintentionally offended a friend, a colleague or a student. The faults in others he easily explained or overlooked altogether, but he was extremely critical of his own. I think that he had a great deal of the spirit of turning the other cheek.

This is, then, briefly, the image of Gordon as my colleague and friend. I hope that I have spoken for others, too.

VANCE R. DITTMAN, JR.

Professor of Law

*University of Denver College of
Law*

W. GORDON JOHNSTON — LAWYER

We who, as practicing lawyers, have known Gordon Johnston as a member of Bar Associations and related groups, cherish vivid memories of another brilliant facet of this many sided man. His sound judgment and wise counsel in Bar Association matters was founded upon his four years of practice in Chicago before he came to Denver. He had been admitted to the Colorado Bar in 1938. It can be sincerely said that he never lost the "common touch" of the practicing lawyer. When the grace and depth of learning of the educator were added to such a foundation, an uncommon person evolved. Gordon was most active in American Bar Association affairs where he had served as adviser to the Section on Legal Education. He was vitally interested in Colorado Bar Association work as a member of its Board of Governors, including active participation in a meeting on the very day of his passing. He worked conscientiously and faithfully on Denver Bar Association committees, many of which required real effort and offered little or no glamour or public notice. His presidency of the Denver Law Club was characterized by the wit and charm which we all associated with him. His inimitable blend of learning and wit, displayed in the prominent parts he took in Law Club shows at Colorado Bar Association conventions, will long be remembered.

The practicing lawyers of Colorado will sorely miss the man who could be so wise and sound in his counsel and advice, and who so gracefully leavened it with humor and warmth.

ROYAL C. RUBRIGHT
Immediate Past President
Denver Bar Association

W. GORDON JOHNSTON — DEVOTED CIVIC LEADER

Except for parents themselves, it is the dedicated, able teacher more than any other member of our free society who is responsible for the kind of country we live in, for it is the teacher who moulds and shapes children at the potter's wheel into decent, useful, educated citizens. In law schools and other colleges it is essential that students be taught not only "book learning" but also a depth of understanding of and perception of humanity. It is vital that each of us learn he has duties as well as privileges.

Such a teacher was W. Gordon Johnston, Dean of the University of Denver College of Law. First as a lawyer, then in succession as instructor, professor and dean he ably sought to uphold the highest traditions of not only the legal profession but also of the teaching profession. He rendered service above self by practicing outside the classroom what he expressed as a part of his teaching and administration creed at college. He believed in active participation in civic and professional activities by teachers not only because of possible interest therein but also because he was convinced that in so doing teachers continued to make the world a better place for all of us.

His varied interests in fields other than civic and in legal and teaching services are not within the scope of this brief memorial, his devotion to civic affairs is. By "civic" in fact is meant those "public" or outside activities that show how this scholar was one who swam the stream of life with the best of men.

Dean Johnston served well his community on the Budget Commit-

tee of the Denver Community Chest and as a member of the Board of Trustees of the Rocky Mountain Council on Family Relations. He was elected to Phi Beta Kappa as an undergraduate at the University of Iowa and served as the first president of the University of Denver chapter; he always retained an active interest in Delta Tau Delta, his college social fraternity, and was active locally and nationally in Omicron Delta Kappa. In the latter organization he first became a member while a student at the University of Iowa. He believed in its service to American youth and continued actively in it until his death. In 1938 he affiliated with its Alpha Pi Circle at the University of Denver. He became Deputy of Province VI in 1945 and held that office until 1951. He became a member of the General Council in 1949, of the Executive Committee of the General Council in 1951, served on many committees and as National President in 1951-53 and 1953-55. He received that organization's Distinguished Service Award and was admitted to its Laureate Circle in 1957.

By any standard of measurement Dean Johnston was a devoted civic leader. We know that the world is a better place for his enlightened conduct and projection into the public affairs of mankind. He knew that men cannot live by bread alone.

LEONARD V. B. SUTTON
Associate Justice
Colorado Supreme Court

W. GORDON JOHNSTON — TEACHER, MENTOR AND FRIEND

To us, the students of the University of Denver College of Law, Dean Gordon Johnston was an outstanding teacher, a respected advisor and, most important of all, a true and unselfish friend who had our interests at heart. In him the qualities of a successful administrator were blended with the finest attributes of genuine understanding. These sterling characteristics permeated his relationship with the student body and earned him wide recognition as one of the friendliest and best-liked law deans in America.

We cannot forget his inspiring speeches, his ready wit, his refreshing sense of humor and his heartwarming demeanor. Nor can we forget his wide participation in student affairs, academic and social. He was especially fond of Derby Day and would enter fully into the gaiety and frolic. When the students arranged for a luncheon he took time and effort to secure outstanding speakers. His desire to draw closer to us reflected itself in his policy of encouraging student government. His relationship with us was one of trust and confidence. We know that he recognized the gratitude and the thanks we gave him.

Despite his many activities, he found time to talk with us individually, to listen to our problems, to give freely of his advice and help. None of us was unimportant to him. We were his special concern and he imparted the many benefits of his wisdom and experience. Such was the nature of our relationship. For these and many untold reasons, Gordon Johnston shall always be remembered by his students.

EDWARD S. BARLOCK
Editor-in-Chief, DICTA
ROBERT D. JACKSON
President, College of Law Student
Senate

W. GORDON JOHNSTON — MAN OF ARTS AND LETTERS

We here commemorate Gordon Johnston, a man of more than ordinary parts. Among his many traits were an acute ear for verbal cadence as well as for musical tone, and an accurate and discriminating eye for the artistic and beautiful. These senses and enthusiasms impelled his active and devoted participation in a great number and variety of artistic and cultural civic enterprises.

That he was also a scholar, a teacher, an imaginative and resourceful law school advisor and administrator, we all know. But there are others who have been these things. Even more unusual was his sense of humor and sense of nonsense, perhaps well illustrated by the following little reminiscence. The perpetrators of one of the Law Club shows needed a man of bearing, of cultured voice, a patrician stage presence and an unimpeachable standing as a patron of the arts. But such a person also had to possess a far less usual trait—an enthusiastic readiness to outrage his own dignity, for his task was to serve as the haughty and pedantic master of ceremonies in introducing a show which commenced with the dishearteningly sincere singing of a well known aria. Once the audience had resigned itself to an evening of unrelieved tedium while the Law Club amateurs were apparently going to attempt to produce good music, it became time for a stagehand to shove a meringue pie in Dick Shaw's face.

All who were present will gleefully remember Gordon's wickedly highbrow and contrivedly tedious introductory remarks to these antic foolshments.

Hardly the proper demeanor for an ordinary law school dean. But if there was one thing he was *not*, it was an ordinary law school dean. A man who loved Shakespeare as he loved Blackstone, and to whom Bach was as important as Marshall, who spent today on the Legal Aid Society, tomorrow on Allied Arts (being president of both), or whose service was nationally known in the Councils of the American Law Institute and the American Bar Association, as well as the Central City Festival, the Symphony Society or the Association of American Law Schools; Dean, fraternity president, naval officer, amateur actor, author, poet, pianist, violinist, and above all a devoted husband and father and a warm friend—yes, he was indeed a man of many parts. We will miss him.

PETER H. HOLME, JR.
Attorney at Law

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W. Gordon Johnston—Poet

(Editor's note: Dean Johnston left many of his ideas in the form of hundreds of poems. He began writing poetry while still in his early teens, and continued throughout his life. The following poem, written a few years ago, was found on his desk the morning following his death.)

*So little we know! How very small
Our true discernment — all
That one can do, when act he must,
Is what seems best — and trust! —*

*Trust there is goodness, purpose — and,
Surely, One at hand,
Who leads him, guides him, wisely knows
Whither, and why, he goes.*

*Count life but a means of gain!
Both in joy and pain,
In sorrow, doubt, and faith. — At last,
Life here being past.*

*One may see plain the half-guessed truth
In the soul's new youth,
When — truly, life was not in vain! —
God shall Himself explain.*

*The long night ends; now breaks the gentle dawn.
The breezes softly sough.
The world is still.*

*The bitter protest in my heart is gone.
I am submissive now.
It is God's will.*

GORDON JOHNSTON