



2007

Roger Douglas Groot: A Personal Memoir

Ann MacLean Massie

Washington and Lee University School of Law, massiea@wlu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarlycommons.law.wlu.edu/wlufac>



Part of the [Legal Biography Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Anne MacLean Massie, *Roger Douglas Groot: A Personal Memoir*, 64 Wash. & Lee L. Rev. 27 (2007).

This Tribute is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Scholarship at Washington and Lee University School of Law Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Scholarly Articles by an authorized administrator of Washington and Lee University School of Law Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact christensena@wlu.edu.

have had a deep love for the institution, for their profession and for their students, and Roger Groot was certainly a member of this group. Yet he needed to maintain a distance; he could never be wholly at ease.

Perhaps it is best to leave these things unexplained. It will be enough to say that I loved him as a brother. We both grew up in the small town south: Roger in the oil fields of Texas, I in the coal fields of West Virginia. We both grew up in towns where the civil religion was Stoicism. We both were of an era when military service was expected of a young man, and we both chose the rigorous regime of a Marine. To deal with a harsh world, we both constructed a rigorous intellectualism as a way of warding off irrationality. In a very different way, we were both religious. In our conversations, there was much that could stay unspoken. I will miss him.

Ann MacLean Massie*

ROGER DOUGLAS GROOT: A PERSONAL MEMOIR

This morning, sitting in my office, I was startled by the rather distant sound of a male voice in the hall. For the tiniest instant, the intonation and inflection sounded much like Roger's. When will I get over expecting to hear him in the hall, regaling colleagues with a humorous anecdote, or to see him, coffee mug in hand, with that cat-that-caught-the-canary look on his face, heading towards me on his way back from class as I have just come dragging up the stairs in the morning?

There is not much one can add to the outpouring of countless encomia since Roger's death, except, perhaps, to share our personal memories, which together add shape and color to his legacy. I came to the Law School in the summer of 1985, appointed by Dean Rick Kirgis on a half-time basis. I was to teach Civil Liberties in the fall (Lash LaRue was the new Law Center Director) and Criminal Procedure: Investigation, then the required first-year course, in the Spring, when Roger Groot went on leave. I met The Legend that first nervous day in July. He was warm and welcoming and jocular, and not at all the gruff, intimidating figure I'd pictured in my mind after hearing the tales. Roger became my instant mentor. As I selected textbooks, tried my hand at a

* Professor of Law and John W. Elrod Law Alumni Association Fellow in Teaching Excellence, Washington and Lee University School of Law.

syllabus and attempted to master the mazes of Lewis Hall, he was somehow always there, interested but never intrusive, constantly encouraging and supportive.

After I'd taught my very first class, Roger and Joe Ulrich took me to lunch. Together they were the essence of the collegiality that pervaded the faculty and made Washington and Lee such a special place to work. One of the great treats from that time was brown bagging in the Faculty Lounge, listening to Roger and Joe and Uncas telling stories. Roger could regale endlessly with tales of clinic clients from the "Big House" at Alderson Women's Prison (he once gave me a glossary of prison lingo), of close shaves riding with cops on the night beat in Norfolk or of priceless classroom moments, never-to-be forgotten by the subjects of his grilling. Though we laughed, it was always apparent how very much Roger cared for his students. He had a well-thought-out philosophy of teaching, which he personified as well as anyone I have ever known.

Roger also took quite seriously his role of mentoring his juniors. One day, in that first class I taught at Washington and Lee, a student made an absolutely outrageous comment. I knew better than to let it throw me, but the other students were alarmed on my behalf. When the class was over, they went straight to Roger. (Students always went straight to Roger with matters that troubled them; who better on the faculty to set things right?) Within five minutes he was in my office, making sure I was not upset, assuring me that my students were appalled by what had happened and were on my side. Another time, about a year later, in response to a student's question about a case, I made an unintended double entendre that brought down the house and turned my face beet red—I was grateful it was the end of the hour! Roger was in my office almost as soon as I got upstairs, laughing his head off. Nothing in the Law School escaped his notice!

Shortly after I came onto the faculty full-time ("You're my last old-lady vote for the year; we need some younger folks around here," Roger told me), the Law School came up with the "Support Committee" system for the tenure process. Roger was opposed, on principle. The policy was actually set to begin the following year, but I told Dean Randy Bezanson that I'd like a committee of Roger and Brian Murchison. (Both Roger and Brian had been mentors to me from day one, anyway.) Randy tried to talk me into someone else, and I said to Roger, "You don't have to do this; I know you voted against it." But he said, "I told the Dean, if I'm going to be on anyone's committee, it might as well be yours." Roger was always a team player—it was the good of the institution that mattered to him, not whether his own preferences were followed. Needless to say, he was a superb confidant and guide during those years, and, as a member

of my tenure committee, insisted on an early disposition. It was always a great comfort to have Roger on your side!

Most of our conversations were fairly brief and took place in the Faculty Lounge or the hall, although there were times when we'd sit in each other's offices and share concerns or just visit in the comfortable way that friends do. But however casual those contacts might have seemed, Roger knew his friends. One day, when I was especially worried about one of our children (those teenage years!), Roger looked at me in the hall and said, "Hey, are you all right?" Of course, the very question brought forth tears, and I blurted out the problem to a sympathetic listener who had been down that road. It was so good to have a friend!

Now, with Roger's death, I find myself grateful beyond measure for having known him, yet crying again. It was *so* good to have *such* a good friend!

Mary Zanolli Natkin, 85L*

Roger and Me

We were unlikely friends. An ex-stockbroker, I came to law school with little interest in criminal law or procedure, especially at eight in the morning with an ex-Marine who had a reputation for making students cry. But I came away from those classes with undying admiration for Roger Groot's ability to convey to nascent lawyers what it means to practice law. He taught us independent thought, judgment and problem solving through the lens of criminal law, but those lessons reached far beyond the substance of the course. Sure, he could be a little cutting in his response if your thinking was sloppy or if you were ill prepared. From the first day of class, he told you the truth whether or not you were ready to hear it. He understood your struggle and would help you think through a problem, but he would not coddle you or condone a lack of effort. He knew that law would present us with both opportunity and responsibility, and he demanded our best on behalf of our future clients.

There is an old saying about leaders: A good leader inspires others with confidence in him, but a great leader inspires others with confidence in

* Clinical Professor of Law, Washington and Lee University School of Law.