

2012: Tom Condon, *Hartford Courant*

Introduction by Andrew Walsh

American journalists are, I submit, either driven to discover what's up or to lay down their own opinions. Relatively few—and today's speaker is among that small number—excel on both sides of the great divide. It is my pleasure today, to introduce Tom Condon, an exemplary American journalist who is the fifth winner of the Moses Berkman, Class of 1920, Memorial Journalism Prize, an honor established by Florence Berkman, also a longtime Hartford journalist, to honor her husband's career. There are certain striking similarities between the careers of this year's honoree and the prize's namesake—although I hasten to add that Tom's career is still in progress.

Mo Berkman and Tom Condon both spent decades at their newspapers. Both committed their working lives to covering Hartford, with outstanding success, unflagging intelligence, and a level of skill that made them deeply respected among their peers and their readers.

Each man also exemplified the main currents of American journalism as practiced in his time. From the early 1920s to the mid-1950s, when American newspapers were still closely tied to political parties, Mo Berkman of the *Hartford Times* was one of the most influential political writers in New England. He planted himself in hotel lobbies, train stations and legislative hallways, chatting energetically and buttonholing sources as they passed by. His great subject was the rise of Democratic Party and what we now call the welfare state, in Connecticut and in the nation.

When the *Hartford Courant* hired Tom in late 1968, he joined a newspaper just emerging as an independent voice after a century of close affiliation with the Republican Party and as a powerhouse in a newly minted metropolitan area. It was soon to be the local sole survivor in the newspaper business and to enjoy an exponential growth in the resources it could devote to journalism, a golden age that seems far, far away, these days. In the 1970s, Tom made his mark as an investigative reporter, a new breed supported by the swelling profits of the monopoly *Courant* and its increasing ambition to be counted among the nation's outstanding dailies.

Unlike most of his colleagues who joined the *Courant* in the 1970s and 1980, Tom's local roots were deep. Born raised in New London, he initially joined the *Courant*'s Old Saybrook Bureau after earning a degree from Notre Dame. His apprenticeship on the shoreline was interrupted by another kind of service--as an Army intelligence officer in Vietnam. But in 1971 he returned to the *Courant*, first to the Middletown Bureau and then to Broad Street, where he worked as a general assignment reporter. Then, along with the late Ted Driscoll, Tom staffed the *Courant*'s first investigative team, producing longer, more probing, better documented stories about more complex social, political and economic issues than newspapers had previously been able to mount. He went on to open a New Haven bureau and then to serve for many years an investigative reporter and special projects editor. In the early 1980s, he earned a law degree at the University of Connecticut, not in search of greener pastures, but rather of seeking the skills to do better, more sophisticated reporting.

I first met him in 1978, when I was a summer intern at the *Courant*. In those days, he was both a star and the obvious paladin of a new, more ambitious journalism, something that even a callow 20 year-old registered immediately. He stood in contrast to the *Courant* old timers of that day, men

like managing editor Irving Kravson, or the paper's longtime Hartford police reporter Bob Lamagdeline. They were good guys and I don't mean to impugn them. But one of Irving's proudest boasts was that he had covered the catastrophic Hartford Hospital fire of 1961 in a take and a half—for the uninitiated, that means a page and a half. Bob came to work every day dressed in navy blue slacks, a white shirt and a navy blue tie, emblems of his total identification with the Hartford Police Department.

Tom was cut from another mold. He was our Woodward, our Bernstein, but in an Irish Catholic mode. During the 1980s he served another tour as a beat reporter, covering Hartford's schools, where he discovered that Weaver High School was sinking into the ground. But after a brief foray into the features department, he shifted decisively toward the realm of opinion, writing a must-read local column for 18 years. As a columnist, he found his life's great subject—the eternal effort to fix Hartford. Over the course of the ensuing years he evolved into a genuine expert on urban life and on the business of transforming it. His authoritative tone and his calm, pragmatic outlook attracted national respect. Many of the more than 30 significant journalism honors he has received have come in recognition of his urban work.

Tom moved in 2003 onto the *Courant's* editorial page, where he founded the lively *Place* section, staffing it with a corps of commentators on urban life. *Place* persists in these twilight days as a twice monthly column. The last decade has been a sore trial for the *Courant* and other metropolitan dailies. One example will suffice. In 2003, the newspaper's editorial department employed 15 journalists full-time. Today it is staffed by five, and, like almost all newspapers, the *Courant* is condemned to do less with less. But in deep adversity, Tom's vast experience, his great skill, and his even temper have proved to be lasting assets for the *Courant*. In the glory days, its editorial column was a committee effort, and often sounded that way. In the era of shrinking resources, the *Courant's* editorials have a personal voice that recalls the days of the *Courant's* early 20th century editor, Charles Hopkins Clark, who wrote for the newspaper for more than 50 years. Like Clark, Tom has a depth of experience and a moral compass that are hard to beat when trying to explain what's going on and what should happen next. Tom is on Hartford's side, but not in anyone's pocket. His knowledge of the people and the place give his editorials rare depth. One recent small gem was the editorial published on October 10 commenting on the death of James Kinsella, a former mayor whose long tenure as the city's probate judge ended in scandal in the early 1980s. The editorial was forthright about judge's downfall, but told the story of Kinsella's continuing and unpublicized good works in Hartford over the last 30 years. It revealed how things have worked here, for good and for ill, and conveyed a powerful sense of the twilight of Irish-American political dominance in the city

On bad days, this feels like this is the twilight of metropolitan journalism as we have known it. It's certainly hard to imagine that there are other Tom Condons now in the pipeline acquiring the deep knowledge and perspective that will allow them someday to write the kinds of editorials Tom writes now. I'd prefer be hopeful that some new business model will revive the kind of journalism that pays bright people a living wage to do the reporting. And until that day, let's hope we have Tom's work to tide us over.

