

Mr. Cropley, First Monday and Supreme Court Stewardship (1952)

*John Q. Barrett**

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When the Supreme Court of the United States took the bench on Monday, October 6, 1952, the first order of business was an announcement that expressed, in a sad context, Court gratitude. Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson delivered the statement:

With deep personal sorrow the Court learned of the death of its Clerk, Charles Elmore Cropley, on June 17, 1952.

Born in 1894, Mr. Cropley lived in Washington throughout his life. At the age of 13 he began his career with this Court as a Page boy. For two years, during 1911 and 1912, he left the Court to work in the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian Institution. However, in 1913, he returned as an Assistant Clerk. On June 6, 1927, he was appointed Clerk. He served in this capacity until his death.

Charles Elmore Cropley loved and revered the Court. He brought to his office a degree of thoroughness and courteous dignity seldom found today. These qualities won for him the respect and friendship of the Court, its staff, and of lawyers and litigants throughout the Nation. On the occasion of his fortieth anniversary with the Court in 1948, the American Bar Association Journal praised his “long and distinguished service, for which many lawyers have been unceasingly grateful from the time they first stepped timidly and hesitantly into the office of the Clerk of this great Court.”

It was a part of Mr. Cropley’s duties to furnish the Court with annual reports which reviewed the affairs of his

* Professor of Law, St. John’s University School of Law, New York City, and Elizabeth S. Lenna Fellow, Robert H. Jackson Center, Jamestown, New York (www.roberthjackson.org). An earlier version of this essay was posted to my Jackson Email List on October 1, 2012.

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office. Countless expressions in these reports reflect the full measure of his devotion, not just to his particular duties, but to the Court as an institution. He sometimes referred to his position as Clerk, not as his “job,” but as his “stewardship.” He spoke regularly of his “inherent desire to preserve and perpetuate the traditions” of his office, of his respect and indebtedness to his associates for “their loyal support in our common endeavor.” Even the various statistics, which he was called upon to recite to the Court, were phrased, not in the sterile language of the usual report, but in the language of one who cherishes a strong personal attachment to his duty. Thus, in commenting on the increased number of applications for membership to the Bar of the Court after 1945, Mr. Cropley wrote feelingly of the great number of lawyers who “were done with the brutality of war,” who now sought the chance to serve “in the Supreme legal forum where civilized process justly composes the conflicts of men.” On another occasion he wrote: “The nearly forty years since I first came to the Court gleam with innumerable facets of memory—those are my cherished and enduring gifts from the Court.”

Perhaps, among those memories, were the proceedings of the Court on Monday, June 6, 1927[, his first day as Clerk]. Chief Justice Taft observed [then]: “The Court takes great pride in the history of the maintenance of the traditions of the Clerk’s office and of the length of service of those who administered it.” And, in announcing Mr. Cropley’s appointment as Clerk, the Chief Justice said: “He has great familiarity with the duties of the office and carries with him to its headship the traditions that have secured such distinguished and useful service by ... his predecessors, with the probability of a life of long usefulness.”^[1]

Surely this expression of confidence has been fulfilled. With sorrow we must now mark the end of Mr. Cropley’s “stewardship,” but we may always take pride that he served so well, that he, himself, was always so proud to have opportunity to serve so well.²

¹ 274 U.S. v, vii (1927).

² 344 U.S. vii-viii (1952).

As the Associate Justices—Hugo L. Black, Stanley Reed, Felix Frankfurter, William O. Douglas, Robert H. Jackson, Harold H. Burton, Tom C. Clark and Sherman Minton—listened that afternoon, they knew well that Mr. Cropley had been, in his friendships and dealings with each of them as with everyone at the Court, all that the Chief Justice described.

Some years earlier, Justice Douglas had captured some of that—especially Cropley’s concern for his staff—in a note scribbled to Justice Black as the Court was about to take its summer recess:

6/15

Dear Hugo

I am sorry I missed [seeing] you [before I left Washington, D.C]. I think Cropley is in a bad physical + emotional condition. I hope you can get his recommendation on salaryes[sic] approved by the Court. He told me he’d resign if he was overridden. The guy is on the edge of a breakdown. I hope we can hold him together.

Goodbye – + have a grand summer

Bill³

³ Note from Justice William O. Douglas to Justice Hugo L. Black, June 15 (photocopy of handwritten note), in William O. Douglas Papers, Library of Congress, Manuscript Division, Washington, D.C., Box 309. Although the year of this note is not indicated, it is written on a piece from a “Supreme Court of the United States Memorandum” notepad that was preprinted with the year “194___,” suggesting that the note dates from the 1940s.