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Joseph Webb McKnight (Obituary originally printed in the Magdalen College Record)

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JOSEPH WEBB MCKNIGHT*

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AN English eccentric in a Texan body, Joseph Webb McKnight has died aged 90. Born and raised in the West Texas town of San Angelo, McKnight was educated at the University of Texas whence he volunteered for the US Navy in World War II. He accepted a Rhodes Scholarship and came up to Magdalen College in 1947 for his BA, BCL, and MA. After earning an LLM from Columbia University in New York and practicing law there for four years with Cravath, Swaine & Moore, he joined the Law Faculty at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. The University awarded him an honorary doctorate of laws on his retirement in 2014.

A specialist in family law, community property law, and legal history, Joseph McKnight taught and mentored generations of students and lawyers from 1955 until shortly before his death. He published leading works in each of his specialty fields, including annual reviews of Texas law. From his teaching and published work, he became a leading authority in Texas family and matrimonial property law. His influence on the law came not only from his scholarship but also from legislative lobbying and drafting. McKnight directed a course in which law students assisted members of the Texas Legislature who needed it. He is credited for being the principal drafter of the Texas Family Code and the Matrimonial Property Act of 1967, among other major statutes.

Perhaps his work in family law, particularly adoption, led to his passion for legal and general history. The books and more than one hundred articles he published included works on Texas history and pioneering work on Spanish influence on law in the American Southwest. His legal history scholarship extended to Britain, France, Italy, and Spain.

McKnight collected more than 6,000 antiquarian law books, one of the largest such collections in private hands. In 2011, he donated the collection to the Underwood Law Library at Dedman Law School. McKnight's first acquisition was the 1633 edition of *Coke on Littleton*, purchased during his Magdalen years, on the Turl. To preserve his precious volumes, he

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studied, then taught, book conservation and bookbinding for more than twenty years.

He cherished Magdalen and Oxford and returned many times to teach in the Southern Methodist University Law School's summer course at University College. Witty and highly convivial, he and his wife Mimi often entertained colleagues, students, friends, and many others they came to befriend, at parties in Oxford and Dallas. Passions for art, music, and fine food and wine always contributed to the success of the occasions.

McKnight grew up on the family ranch during the Great Depression. He kept a life-long love for the West Texas of his origin and is interred there. He was preceded in death by his parents, four younger siblings, and his first wife, Julia Ann Dyer McKnight. He is survived by his second wife, Mildred Payne McKnight; sons John B. and J. Adair; step-children, Sawnie R. Aldredge III and Amy P. Aldredge; and several grandchildren. He lived and died a Texan and a Magdalen man.

Born 17 February 1925, died 30 November 2015.