

I. F. Stone

I. F.—Izzie—Stone, the journalist, pamphleteer, political junkie and student of the Greek classics who died the other day at the age of 81, never got an even break from the folks who described him—and they were many. It seemed as though Mr. Stone, a prodigiously energetic and deeply serious man, was always either being slandered by his enemies on the right or canonized by his admirers on the left. Neither saw the man as he was, and in some ways the canonizers did him more of a disservice than his savage political enemies did: they described a mythologized, unreal man and thus failed to pay respect to his genuine achievements.

By way of honoring those achievements it is necessary, for instance, to dispense with the romantic notion of Mr. Stone as a lifelong prophet, a man who knew and understood it all all along. On the contrary, Mr. Stone badly misappraised many people, governments and ideologies along the way; he conceded as much himself; his virtue was not that he was infallible in his judgments, but rather that he was capable—not an impulse the journalistic trade is famous for—of admitting error and revising opinion.

This rare virtue proceeded from another inclination of his: to consult what the learned call “primary sources” and what the rest of us mean

when we cite the famous Casey Stengelism, “You could look it up.” Mr. Stone looked it up—again and again and again and no matter how tedious the digging was. Back in the pre-Fax, pre-word-processor days, when you could only get transcripts of important congressional hearings and other such events by trudging up to some unwelcoming office and taking notes from a single available tome, reporters deciding to do the inconvenient thing and go see *precisely* what had been said often as not had to wait because Mr. Stone was already there, poring intently over the text.

I. F. Stone was a man of the political left, but increasingly over the years he also became a man of surprises and one who arrived at his positions the hard way. He was a journalist who took absolutely nothing for granted and accepted practically nothing at face value: he wanted to see the evidence, the record for himself. In his later years, in a notably graceful retirement, Mr. Stone set about learning Greek so that he could read Plato in the original and reach his own conclusions about the character of Socrates. He was absolutely happy and engrossed in this work. No one should have been surprised: the subject was different, but the impulse to see for himself was the same.