

William B. Eerdmans Jr. (1923–2020), president of Eerdmans Publishing from 1963 to 2014

William B. (“Bill”) Eerdmans died peacefully on November 13, 2020. Bill was born in 1923 to William B. Eerdmans Sr. and Paula Eerdmans, who were immigrants from the Netherlands and from Germany, respectively. Educated at the McCallie School in Chattanooga TN, Bill was a high school senior when Pearl Harbor brought the United States into World War II. He served in North Africa and then in Europe until the end of the war.

After the war and a bachelor’s degree from the University of Michigan, Bill went to work at the publishing company that his father had founded in 1911. In 1963, he became president. He continued the company’s long history of publishing important works in theology, biblical studies, church history, and religious reference, but also expanded the line to include books on important social, political, and cultural issues. He also enlarged the company’s traditional Reformed focus to embrace more broadly Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox, and Jewish authors. In the 1990s, he launched Eerdmans Books for Young Readers, which has won international recognition as a publisher of children’s books. In 2014, Bill passed the president and publisher titles to his wife Anita but continued his work in acquisitions. In 2018 he retired.

In many ways Bill was an old-school “gentleman publisher” who relied on strong publisher-author relationships and comfortably confirmed agreements with a handshake. But he was also wonderfully open to next-generation ways of doing things that unfolded as his career moved into its fourth and fifth decades.

Bill was known for his quirky sense of humor. Authors and publishing colleagues treasured his letters—always dictated to his patient executive assistants—which he crafted with abundant humor and clever wordplay. He was an inveterate nickname-giver, to the delight (and sometimes consternation) of the recipients. He was also enormously generous, with both his money and his time, always living by the principle that much is required of one to whom much is given.

“Not for Bill the idea that publishing should cater to the latest trends. The point was to lead, not follow,” said longtime Eerdmans editor-in-chief Jon Pott. “Bill’s command of his field was impressive and his singular publishing achievements were many and great. . . . But it was Bill the deeply committed but high-spirited publishing personality who somehow counted for most. He knew his work, but he also thoroughly relished it, from dizzying first authorial encounter to plunk of the final product on his overburdened desk.”

According to Anita, “Bill loved joking around, and sometimes you could almost see the wheels turning in his head as he tried to come up with the perfect clever phrase for the moment. Yet he also took his work very seriously. Until the last few years, most evenings would find him with an Eerdmans book or a manuscript in his lap, even on vacations! He was responsible for some very important books and series that we published over the years, and our longtime interest in religious perspectives on important political and cultural issues grew out of his own personal concern about those issues.”

Eerdmans editor-in-chief James Ernest recalls first meeting Bill—“a living legend,” in his eyes—at a reception in 2002. After coming to work for Eerdmans in 2015, he got to know Bill as an irrepressibly charismatic, entrepreneurial publisher whose “main aim with his employees was to keep us feeling appreciated and encouraged.”

A private burial was held with immediate family in attendance. When pandemic conditions abate sufficiently, a public memorial service will be planned.