“All the rooms of the house were equally dark and cluttered but filled with fascinating objects. Ralph claims dirt is good for you. Besides, if you dust, you can’t tell if someone moved something.”
Alison Barnet

Ralph’s library at 9 Wellington Street.

Ralph Horne

By Alison Barnet

Photography courtesy of Shellburne Thurber

This story was hard for me to write. Politically and socially, Ralph Horne and I are often on opposite sides of South End issues. When he was a member of the “Balance Committee,” calling for an immediate moratorium on all subsidized housing, I was wondering, in print, “What new committees do we have to look forward to? The Committee for Greed and Callousness?” While he was throwing vegetables at Mayor Flynn for proposing the “Tree of Life” for battered women, I was doing a satire on South End gentrification on cable TV. Nevertheless, I’ve gotten to know Ralph well and enjoy what we have in common: brains, a sense of humor, and a wee bit of eccentricity.

Ralph is a polymath, a person of encyclopedic learning. He can go from talking knowledgably about Coptic Christians to Emily Dickinson to forest fires in Oklahoma. One day he asked me, “Why can’t I be like other people? I’ve been laying here all night thinking about Sir Isaac Newton.”

While doing research in 2005 at the South End Historical Society—where, by the way, Ralph was instrumental in choosing the wallpaper—I noticed that Ralph had written a South End history. SEHS couldn’t find it, so I sent him a note. He responded immediately and invited me to his house at 9 Wellington Street. I was greeted in the lobby by a male figure on the newel post wearing nothing but a necklace.

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Ralph had written two unpublished South End histories, one for SEHS—rejected, he believed, because there were too many references to Malcolm X. The other was “A Frank Look at the South End and Its Future,” a “rosy” picture written for developer Mario Nicosia.

He took me up to the top floor where his South End files were kept and generously allowed me to look through them and make copies. The room was dark because tree branches covered the window, and some had broken right through. All the rooms of the house were equally dark and cluttered but filled with fascinating objects. Ralph claims dirt is good for you. Besides, if you dust, you can’t tell if someone moved something.

Ralph had just published I Was There: The Autobiography of John the Beloved Disciple, which he autographed for me under the name Blaise Bulot, his pen name for two pornographic novels, Dark Waters, a “gothic tale of sex, violence, death, depravity and VooDoo” and Starr Lyte, both set in New Orleans, where Ralph once lived.

Downstairs, he sat in his study at a desk with a mantel that reached the ceiling. Country Life magazines were stacked on the floor, a large ornate chair was piled high with loose papers, and a Royal typewriter sat on an ottoman. There was a Bible open on a book stand, a ceramic lion holding its mouth open for the mail, and a silk throw draped carelessly on an antique couch. A small bust of Dante, a skull (skulls are beautiful objects in Ralph’s estimation), an old cash register, and an antique doll in a cradle were a few of the other items. On the shelves were some of Ralph’s 5000 books wrapped in plain blue or brown paper and a collection of space toys. Bordering the ceiling in gold were the names of great men: SOCRATES HORNE MICHELANGELO.

Ralph’s desk at 9 Wellington Street.

By now, photographer Shellburne Thurber had discovered Ralph’s quirky house museum and become a close friend. Her photos, capturing the color, the dust, and the uniqueness, were exhibited at the Barbara Krakow gallery in spring 2011.

Ralph is a polymath, a person of encyclopedic learning. He can go from talking knowingly about Coptic Christians to Emily Dickinson to forest fires in Oklahoma. One day he asked me, “Why can’t I be like other people? I’ve been laying here all night thinking about Sir Isaac Newton.” He’s a scientist, a writer, an artist, and a lawyer. He built an elaborate doll house and a sports car he calls the Ralphmobile. And he loves to shock people by saying he’s a pornographer. One of his favorite stories involves Dwight Strong, a West Springfield Street neighbor whom he knew quite well, although neither had ever talked about

Bordering the ceiling in gold were the names of great men: SOCRATES HORNE MICHELANGELO.

what the other one did. It wasn’t until Ralph read the obituary that he learned Strong had been head of the Watch & Ward Society, and there was Ralph—the self-described “prince of pornography!”

Born in Haverhill in 1929, Ralph is proud of his Yankee heritage. He received a degree in chemistry from MIT, class of 1950; a Masters at the University of Vermont; and a PhD at Columbia, where, he claims he was arrested for leading a panty raid on Barnard, Columbia’s women’s
When real estate broker Bob Bennett took Ralph to see 9 Wellington Street in 1971 (Ralph likes to think “the Union Park crowd” didn’t know where Wellington Street was at the time), it was such a bad neighborhood that, according to Ralph, Bennett felt it necessary to leave his money and his keys back at the office. The house, he says, was “in unspeakable condition, a flophouse but amazingly intact in terms of architecture features. Incredibly filthy, we had to shovel it out. We fired a couple of shots to get everyone out.”

Other South End-as-Urban-Jungle tales involve Ralph chasing criminals, invariably black, an ax in one hand and a Smith & Wesson in the other. Hèd pin them down on, say, the Columbus Avenue center strip, but when the cops came they’d try to arrest Ralph.

Once after “running the gauntlet” at Mass. and Columbus—“Going out, honey? Going out, honey?”—he told a policeman how he could tell a woman was a prostitute: “She’s not selling poppies for the Veterans of Foreign Wars.”

Then there was the “dead of night” “rescue” of the cupola that was once atop the House of the Angel Guardian in

Ralph’s garden at 9 Wellington Street.

It was “the hippie thing to do,” he says, but he was 40 at the time and insists he was never a hippie. The hippies, meanwhile, believed he was high on celery salt. One of his many unpublished tomes, “The Death of the Last Love Experiment” tells all.

Ralph, friends agree, is contrary and an enigma, sometimes coming down on two sides of an issue.

He also studied at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and his paintings, which he calls “colored drawings,” are in several important collections. They are complicated affairs, often based on Greek mythology. Many people don’t like them, he says, and someone actually fell down in prayer in front of a painting, convinced the Devil was in it. A little less complicated is “The Fountain of Youth.” In the center, a fountain spouts blood, the symbol of youth. On one side is what the old cherish, including the blind leading the blind and Greed chained to his money, and on the other what the young cherish: beauty, nakedness. There are several skulls and a monkey. The monkey had nothing to do with it, says Ralph, but he’s happy with the way he drew him.

Ralph’s orange chair at 9 Wellington Street.

Roxbury. Royal Cloyd and Alex Cassie were in on it too. After Ralph’s redesign, it became the kiosk in front of the Boston Center for the Arts.

A much more risqué story involves the late realtor Betty Gibson, whose transformation of the South End Ralph greatly admired. She once asked him to crawl under her huge wooden bed to look for the manufacturer’s label. “Betty,” said Ralph, “what will the neighbors think?”
The neighbors probably already figured out that Ralph was gay—or “Uranian,” the term he prefers. He was a founder of the Boston chapter of Black & White Men Together, a member of Prime Timers (headquartered at the Harriet Tubman House), Gay and Lesbian Scientists and Engineers, and the Lambda Car Club, a/k/a the “grease queens.” His experiences as a gay man have been different from most— he says he’s never been discriminated against.

One day, Ralph was waiting for me at the top of the stairs wearing a “The Dumping Ground is Full!” button, a Tree of Life relic. “We lost some battles, but we won the war,” he always says. According to Ralph, one of the lost battles involved Tenants Development Corporation. In the mid-’80s when TDC wanted to build 400 Mass. Ave., which backed on Wellington Street, Ralph and others sued in federal court, charging that no environmental impact study had been done and that TDC was racist—they claimed there were no white people on its board. To better fight such projects, Ralph obtained a law degree at Suffolk in July 1979.

Yet, when you came right down to it, Ralph liked the old neighbors better. “I’m the only one who sits on the stoop. The new people don’t like it that I’m out there with bare feet.” One day, he looked out the window and saw a real estate agent and a potential buyer across the street. They didn’t see him but he could hear what they said. The potential buyer looked over at Ralph’s building and asked, “Doesn’t that hurt property values?” And the agent replied, “He can’t live forever.”

Says Ralph, not without perverse pride, “My house used to be the best house on the street and now it’s the worst.”

He doesn’t drink and doesn’t even care much about eating. If you ask, “Do you go to South End restaurants?” he answers, “Oh, good Heavens, no! They’re too expensive. I’m not a food person anyway, I don’t like eating.” He once got upset with a live-in cook who served fresh asparagus when Ralph preferred canned.

In 2008, after a drop in blood pressure, Ralph was taken to Mass. General and then to Spaulding Rehab, where an attempt was made to declare him mentally incompetent. To question Ralph’s sanity and competence was the worst thing anyone could do, and to Ralph the hearing was an “auto de fe.” Luckily, friends worked hard to free him. Not as lucky was the diagnosis of a rare degenerative disease for which Ralph would need 24-hour care. He sold 9 Wellington, donating much of his art and possessions to Brown University’s gay archives, and moved into the Susan Bailis House. He now lives in a private apartment with live-in attendants.

Now 84, Ralph is not about to throw in the sponge yet. “I think I’ll take the sponge with me.”

Photographer Shellburne Thurber and Ralph. 2009.

Alison Barnet has lived in the South End since 1964. She is the author of Extravaganza King: Robert Barnet and Boston Musical Theater.