Jim McCartin

BY ELEANOR HYDE

Ed. note: *"Profiles" will appear from time to time in* New York Irish History *to celebrate the experiences and accomplishments of members and friends, and to bring these to the attention of readers. With this issue, we present profiles of two Roundtable members, Jim McCartin and Father Donald Forrester.*

Jim McCartin was a well-known member of the Roundtable who died in 2004. Eleanor Hyde knew him as a friend and fellow author for more than 40 years.

Jim McCartin was an almost-but-not-quite; one of the talented unsung. A first-rate poet and short story writer, a stirring playwright, he took the world's obliviousness to his works with a certain irony, once remarking over his favorite drink, a dry martini, that had he been born in Dublin instead of Brooklyn his plays would be on Broadway.

Although well-informed and eager to discuss far-flung subjects, Jim was a private person, who rarely spoke of his past. What little his friends knew of his early days was sketchy, gathered from a few of his more autobiographical works. His mother had died during his early childhood. She might have been his father's second wife, which would explain his stepbrother's resentment (see below). His sister, Kathleen, to whom he dedicated his book of short stories, he loved dearly. According to "The Crazy Aunt," Jim's father had come to America as a young man from Ballinamore, a small town in County Leitrim, and in New York worked at menial jobs such as selling subway tokens.

Jim was born in Bay Ridge in 1927 and there he died in 2004. Not in the same house, but in the same neighborhood. In the intervening years, both he and Bay Ridge had undergone extensive changes.

The Bay Ridge he grew up in had chiefly to do with dock workers, Norwegian sailors, and bars. One of his best, and incidentally, most autobiographical plays, *Stella's Sanctuary Bar* (performed at the Common Basis Theater in 1998), rivals Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge*. The play, set in the '50s, deals with union racketeering in the dock yards, pitting friend against friend, brother against brother. In brief, the younger brother, Tim Degnan, just out of college has returned from Manhattan to his old Brooklyn neighborhood. (Jim, after serving in the U.S. Navy in World War II, attended Columbia University under the G.I. Bill.) Here Degnan meets up with boyhood friends and his older brother, who is involved in union racketeering. This is the same brother, who, when Tim was a boy fighting off the neighborhood bully, cheered the bully on.

Eleanor Hyde is a writer whose stories have appeared in national and literary magazines. Her off-broadway play, Home Permanent, *was made into a film. She has published three novels and currently is writing a historical novel,* The Walking Hoax.

Photo: *A Leitrim football team, probably from the Leitrim Young Men's Association and taken around the time Jim McCarten's father emigrated from Ireland to New York. Courtesy of Library of Congress.*

Jim had once told me about a similar incident during one of our frequent lengthy phone calls or maybe over a drink after we'd gone on a round of galleries or to a museum. Our art expeditions were always enjoyable. We played games, picking out which painting we'd buy if we had the money, or if we saw "this" painting thrown out on the sidewalk, would we take it home with us. Jim could be endearingly inconsistent, complaining one minute that the Frick shouldn't charge an entry fee so more people could view its works, and the next minute, that so many museum goers got in the way of the paintings.

Jim's work did not go completely without acclaim. His short stories appearing in literary quarterlies received many awards. A short story collection, *The Crazy Aunt and Other Stories* (Lincoln Springs Press), was published in 1988, and *Selected Plays* published by Avena Press in 1999. (The publisher of Avena Press, Angela Carter, was a special friend of Jim's. Her store, the Irish Book Shop, in the Broadway/SoHo area was a favorite hangout for Irish writers and readers.) Besides receiving a grant from the National Endowments for the Arts, Jim was invited to both Yaddo and the MacDowell Colony where he worked on plays produced in regional and off-Broadway theatres, as well as poems published in numerous poetry magazines.

Benno Haenel, Jim's long-time friend and director of many of his plays, recalls that Jim had received a high school scholarship, and at Columbia was encouraged in his work by his teacher, Mark van Doren, who invited him for visits to his Connecticut home.

Jim and I met in the late '50s after he'd graduated from Columbia and was living and working in Manhattan where I'd just arrived from Ohio. We attended a writing class at The New School, but not the same one, and were introduced by a mutual friend who took both classes (Lore Segal, this year's finalist for the Pulitzer Prize for her book *Shakespeare's Kitchen*). We formed a writing group along with a few others, including a staff worker on the *Paris Review* and held early meetings at the Limelight in the Village (long before it was busted by the police as a favorite hangout for drug users), later meeting in one another's apartments. Jim lived in Chelsea with his lifetime partner, Jack McHugh. They had a garden. The neighborhood was pleasant enough, but not the exceptional place for artists to live as it is today.

Jim, too, when I first knew him, was pleasant enough but no one, I naively believed, especially exceptional—an average person of average height with average blue eyes and average brown hair. As he grew older, his blue eyes grew bluer, his brown hair metamorphosed into a white cloud – he looked more the gifted Irish playwright he'd become. And somewhere along the way he'd also become quite charming and erudite. He read constantly, and knew a bit about everything, and a lot about some things—especially when it came to the creative arts.

Eventually, Jim and Jack bought a house in New Jersey to be near Jack's work as a chemist. Their house sat atop a hill, the lake below visible through the trees; it was rather like living in a tree house. A perfect place where Jim could read, write, and meditate as he walked his beloved black mutt, Shadow, around the lake.

But this was a family area, suburban, not the sort of place one would expect to welcome a gay couple. Whether to their, or their neighbors' credit, they were readily accepted into the community, invited to picnics and parties, as well as to children's school performances.

Besides teaching at Montclair State College, Jim became active in working with children from New Jersey's deprived areas, his works commissioned by the Inner City Ensemble of Paterson. One of these, *Breaking In*, in which a hostile teenage girl's attempt to rob an old lady ends in friendship, became much in demand, the role of the hostile teenager cast as either a girl or boy, black or white.

His plays struck a chord with the audience. It was gratifying to see his play, *I Think I'll Get a Cat*, receive a standing ovation and calls of Amen! and Author! Author! when performed at a Fourteenth Street theater with a racially mixed cast and audience. Jim would have loved it, but unfortunately, he was home suffering from a racially mixed mugging on his way back from the subway the night before.

In the late '80s and early '90s, Jim joined the Playwright/Director's unit of the Actor's Studio and came to Manhattan frequently, often spending the night with his long-time friends, Jacky and Al Shapiro and their children whom he considered his second family. According to Benno Haenel, also a member of the Actors Studio, the artistic director, Frank Corsaro, thought Jim had a real talent for acting as well as playwriting. (Acting was a requirement for playwrights in the unit.) Haenel remarked that Jim was "gracious to work with…a little testy when I suggested rewrites, but later he learned to ignore them." He added that Jim had a good feeling for potential actors for roles in his plays. Jim was then working on two plays, *Priests* and *The Burning of Father Fox*. Struggling might be a more apt term. He wrote numerous versions, none he considered satisfactory.

Though no longer a practicing Catholic, Jim had a deep-rooted interest in the religion he was born into. He delved into Irish history, traveled frequently to Ireland and enrolled in a course in Gaelic. He also had a strong feeling for family, which would explain why he returned to his childhood neighborhood after his partner's death. Although his and his family's interests were a world apart, Jim had a deep concern for their welfare.

It seems, too, that those Jim met and grew fond of also became his family, an important part of his life, as he became an important part of theirs. His last play, *The House*, was also about a family. Many of us considered it his best, but alas we'd only heard the reading; it had yet to be performed before his death.

Henry James was Appalled

by Jim McCartin

Winslow Homer's paintings were, he wrote
"hideously ugly." Homer seemed to think
sweating girls in calico, freckled boys
in cowhide boots, dreary American fields,
fit subjects for works of art.
Homer, he advised, should transform
Stubbled fields into velvet lawns
peopled by gentlemen and ladies
so civilized no hint of glands
would mar their porcelain exteriors,
and should add "secrets and mysteries
and coquetteries" so the American
wilderness would seem at least,
as pictorial as Capri or Tangiers.
Then he should turn to literature
and learn "intellectual tricks"
in order to attain mastery of his craft
like Bourne Jones and Sparteli Stillman.
With this advice James abandoned
Homer and America, and never learned
that Homer had no interest in Coquetteries
or intellectual tricks, and instead
of seeking velvet lawns, retreated
to deeper wilderness where he studied
the mystery of mankind's assumption
of primacy in a world so vast human
beings are only dots of pigment
barely visible in an undeciphered universe.

Father Donald Forrester: Early Reminiscences

BY JOHN RIDGE

On April 22, 1998, John Ridge conducted an interview with Roundtable member, Father Donald Forrester. This is a summary of his early reminiscences.

Photo: *Picture of Eamon De Valera published at the time of his secret visit and speech at All Saints Church in 1919. Young Donald Forrester was there. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

Donald Forrester was born in 1906 in Manhattan and his first home was at 254 West Twenty-ninth Street, a coachman's loft apartment located over a stable. All his grandparents were natives of Ireland, on his father's side from Dublin and on his mother's side from County Mayo. Frequently, visitors right off the boat from Ireland came to stay with them, many of them "horse people," as well as his mother's McDonnell relatives from Roundfort and Hollymount. With the nearby commercial activity and a fire house with barking dalmatians directly across the street, the neighborhood was far from quiet.

When Donald Forrester was six years old his widowed mother moved to 133 Street and Park Avenue where his coachman grandfather owned a tenement in a largely Irish area. Grandfather Forrester had been raised with a heavy infusion of the Irish language, and he taught the Forrester children (five brothers) a smattering of phrases and prayers. Often the correct use and pronunciation of Irish phrases brought a penny reward from the old Irishman. The Forrester home read three New York Irish weeklies every week, but daily newspapers that were considered pro-English like the *Times* and *Post* were not allowed. Newspapers that were more sympathetic to the Irish like the *Globe, Herald* and *World* were, however, admissible.

The local parish, All Saints, at Madison Avenue and 129 Street was a center of the Irish language movement in the United States. Its pastor, Monsignor James

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Power, was a Waterford-born scholar who combined a poet's love for his native language with fervent Irish nationalist politics. In the 1890s he brought the Irish Christian Brothers to America to teach in his grammar school and later to found a high school, All Hallows. The brothers were the shock troops of the Irish revival in the city, and

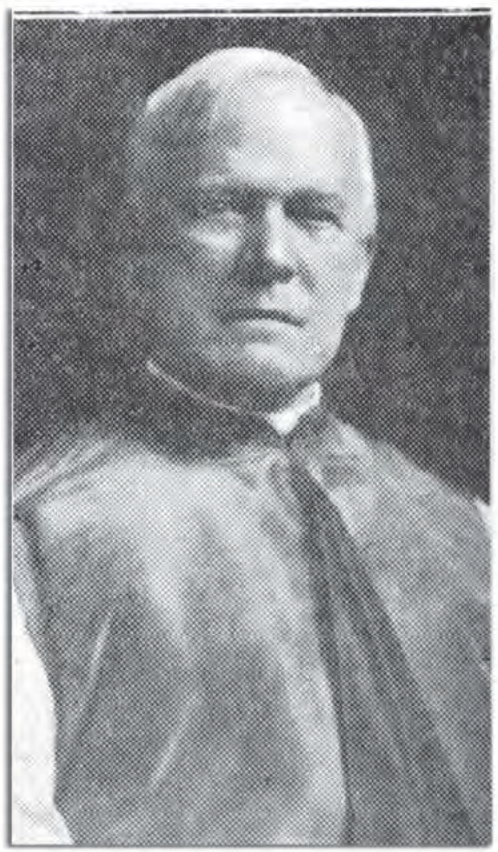

Photo: *Monsignor James Power, pastor of of All Saints Church and a leader of Irish culture and nationalism in New York. Courtesy of John T. Ridge.*

Donald Forrester simply stated they "filled me up with Irish."

At All Saints School Irish language and history were part of the regular school curriculum for all students. Young Donald won silver medals for Irish language and a gold medal for Irish history at an early *feis* of the Gaelic Society in 1919 held at the Turn Hall at East Eighty-fifth Street where the Jaeger House Irish Dance Hall was located years later. The school turned out a contingent of boys costumed in ancient Irish dress and carrying spears of Gaelic warriors for the St. Patrick's Day Parade, but the tough street kids of Irish Harlem hated wearing the garb because the kilts too closely resembled dresses.

In 1920 at age fourteen Donald Forrester began attending Irish classes on 125th Street near Park Avenue conducted by the Harlem Gaelic Society on the second floor over a store in a commercial building. The group was a small but close-knit one that also helped produce an Irish language magazine and hosted speaking and musical events. The young scholar was the only regular among a handful of boys who attended the classes as most of the other students were older Irish-born recent immigrants.

In 1919 Eamon De Valera secretly and illegally arrived in New York, and soon made one of his first public speeches in the undercroft of All Saints Church. Donald Forrester remembered the anxious and hush-hush atmosphere that surrounded the DeValera arrival. The Irish leader was introduced by Monsignor Power in his usual polished manner, and the pastor's remarks seemed to overshadow those of the more reserved DeValera. Young Forrester proudly stood only five or six feet from DeValera on this historic occasion.

Donald Forrester was ordained a Paulist priest in 1934 and was assigned to the Good Shepherd Parish in the Inwood section of Manhattan. He became the first chaplain of the newly founded neighborhood Division Three of the Ancient Order of Hibernians in 1937, and was also a chaplain for the County Mayo Association. He was a familiar face at Irish functions in the city almost until his passing in 2002.