

Later, there is the actual son

Tom McHale: Melancholy talent lost at 40

By Tom Fox
Inquirer Editorial Board

There was a dark, gloomy side to Tom McHale, the talented young Scranton author who died in Florida earlier in the spring. The brooding melancholy was part of his Irish heritage, and it was mirrored in his writings. And, sadly, in his tragic and untimely death.

When Tom McHale died, at age 40, the initial cause of death was thought to be a massive coronary, shocking his many admirers in the sprawling Coal Region and beyond. But Time magazine wrote the final footnote in the troubled life of Tom McHale.

"By his own hand (carbon monoxide)." the brief Time item read.

The restless gnawing that drove the young Temple graduate, Class of '63, to skewer the Catholic Church for instilling fears he saw as crimes against his childhood — "I write to exorcise personal demons," he explained early in his career — and to rail at what he saw as the church's hypocrisy and intolerance, had ulti-

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mately driven Tom McHale to commit the final indignity upon himself.

It is all so sad and senseless. Tom McHale had so much to live for. He had a way with the language, with plots and character development. He might have been another Irish writer in the John O'Hara mold, but John O'Hara and Tom McHale were worlds apart.

John O'Hara, a Coal Region product, wrote about the old WASP lifestyle, about wealth and status and power, the sort of existence, you got the impression reading John O'Hara, that John O'Hara lusted for.

Tom McHale, a postman's son, was from another time and culture. He wrote with distrust and contempt for

the Catholic Church. He was anti-clerical and anti-church, two characteristics of the troubled 1960s, the restless age that spawned Tom McHale and others like him.

This irreverence was reflected in Tom McHale's first two novels, *Principato*, set in South Philadelphia with a war against the church theme — one critic called it "Italian, Irish style" — and *Farragan's Retreat*, this one an Irish attack on Catholic values and morals with a Center City townhouse for a backdrop.

The early novels were Tom McHale's best work. His nouns and verbs seemed to drop down a notch in his subsequent efforts. He just couldn't seem to get another good book out of his gut.

Perhaps that was because the values of the 1960s were so ephemeral, as opposed to the longevity and Victorian clout of the old WASP value system that consumed John O'Hara.

It must be difficult to write novels when you are young. It takes so much living to establish a personal value system and in today's market place there is such a mad rush for



Tom McHale

success that when success is denied, young and disillusioned hearts often fall on despair.

Perhaps that was Tom McHale's sad fate. If he had gotten another good book out of his being, his soul might have been refreshed. He might have

had the courage to go on living and writing for the ultimate pleasure and enjoyment of so many of us.

But when you are Irish and consumed by the terrible Irish melancholy, the deck sometimes seems stacked against you and the will to face reality is no match for the wild urge to end it all.

It happened to an Irish writer in New Orleans years ago. John Kennedy Toole couldn't get his first novel, *A Confederacy of Dunces*, published and, in a moment of hopeless despair, he took his life.

Years later, thanks to the determination of Toole's mother, the novel was published, winning a number of coveted literary awards posthumously.

I saw great similarity in the prose of John Kennedy Toole and Tom McHale. The Irish melancholy was evident in their plots and characters, in their irreverent view of human futility, an irreverence that bordered on insanity, yet, an insanity of which both men wrote with purpose.

"I write about men seeking balance and stability amid the madness that

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often surrounds them," Tom McHale once explained, rationalizing the license as the writer fulfilling his own fantasies through his characters.

On another occasion, Tom McHale told an interviewer that he wore no scars from his bitter literary attack on his church.

"If I hadn't gone through the childhood that messed me up," he said, "I'd be terribly afraid that I'd wake up at 40 and do myself in out of absolute despair and disillusionment."

It was prophetic small talk, for, eight years later, at age 40, Tom McHale, burdened with the terrible melancholy of the Irish, did just that. God rest his troubled soul.