

Photo: Bruce Weber

# “A close encounter with ...Colm Toibin”

The American Church Hall, Geneva - October 7th, 2005



*This is the first in a series of close encounters with famous writers to honour the late Harold Masterson, a founder member of the Geneva Literary Aid Society. Proceeds of this event will go towards the Masambo Fund to provide care and treatment for Red Cross and Red Crescent volunteers living with HIV/AIDS.*

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## INTRODUCING COLM TOIBIN

Colm Toibin was born in Enniscorthy, Co. Wexford in the southeast of Ireland in 1955. Three of his grandparents were born in the town or close to the town. One great-grandfather owned Whelan's, or Whaelan's, public house (since demolished) on the Island Road; another great-grandfather worked as a stonemason in the town; another was a small farmer outside the town; the fourth great-grandfather was a farmer near Tullow in County Carlow. His grandfather Patrick Tobin was a member of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, as was his grand-uncle Michael Tobin. Patrick Tobin took part in the 1916 Rebellion in Enniscorthy and was subsequently interned in Frongach in Wales. His uncle Pdraig Toibin, who died in 1995, worked as a journalist on the local newspaper The Enniscorthy Echo. He fought in the War of Independence and on the Republican side in the Civil War.

Both Colm Toibin's father and his uncle Pdraig were involved in the Fianna Fail party in Enniscorthy. His father Micheal was born in 1913 and died in 1967. He worked for almost thirty years as a secondary teacher in the Christian Brothers in Enniscorthy. He also founded the Castle Museum in the town in the 13th century castle. His father's writings about the town's history and heritage were edited by Colm Toibin and published in 1998. ( Enniscothy: History and Heritage, New Island Books.)

Colm Toibin was the second youngest of five children. (His older sister Bairbre Toibin is the author of the novel 'The Rising', New Island Books, 2001.) He went to the Christian Brothers School in Enniscorthy and then, for the last two years, to St Peter's College Wexford. In 1972 he went to University College Dublin where he studied History and English. He took a B.A. in 1975.

The day after he finished his finals in September 1975 he left for Barcelona where he stayed for three years. His experiences and the Catalan landscape and culture have been dealt with to some extent in his first novel 'The South' and 'Homage to Barcelona'. He returned to Dublin in 1978 and began work on an M.A. in Modern English and American Literature. His thesis, never handed in, was on the American poet Anthony Hecht.

He wrote for *In Dublin* and *Hibernia*, and later *The Sunday Tribune*. In 1981 he became Features Editor of *In Dublin* and at the end of 1982 joined *Magill*, then Ireland's main current affairs magazine, as Editor, and stayed in *Magill* until 1985. In 1985 he left *Magill* and began to travel, moving first through South America and ending in Argentina where he attended the trial of Galtieri and the other generals in Buenos Aires. Later he travelled in the Sudan and Egypt. His best journalism from the 1980s, which includes sections on South America and Africa, is collected in 'The Trial of the Generals'.

Colm Toibin's first novel 'The South' was finished in 1986 but not published until 1990, being turned down in the meantime by most English publishers. (It was published by *Serpent's Tail*.) His first book, 'Walking Along the Border' with photographs by Tony O'Shea was published in 1987. In September 1987 he began work on his second novel 'The Heather Blazing'. In 1988 he spent a year in Barcelona where he wrote 'Homage to Barcelona' and renewed his acquaintance with the city and with certain villages in the Pyrenees where 'The South' is set and where he has spent a great deal of time since then. 'The Heather Blazing' was finished in 1991 and published in 1992 by Peter Straus at Picador who has remained Colm Toibin's editor. In Ireland, during these years he wrote regularly for 'The Sunday Independent', first as drama critic and television critic and later as political commentator.

In the 1990s Colm Toibin published two more novels, 'The Story of the Night' and 'The Blackwater Lightship', another travel book 'The Sign of the Cross: Travels in Catholic Europe' and edited several anthologies, including 'The Penguin Book of Irish Fiction'. His most recent novel, *The Master*, was shortlisted for the Man Booker Prize in 2004. It won the Los Angeles Times Book of the Year Award and was in the New York Times list of top ten books for 2004. ■

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## ***Interview with Colm Toibin***

**Colm Toibin casts a cool eye on new ways of being Irish - cosmopolitan, consumerist, even gay.**

### **The shock of the new** **Independent.co.uk**

**18 September 1999**

I first met Colm Toibin when he was singing a ferocious song in Catalan. It was “The Glens of Antrim”; we were all drunk. He was with a woman, a night-club owner from Trieste, and radiated foreignness. Today, with the river-light streaming from the Thames over the Aroma Cafe’s melanine in the Festival Hall, neither of us is drunk - but he still looks Spanish.

I have been re-reading his non-fiction books, such as *Bad Blood*, for which he walked the Irish frontier at the height of the Troubles. He stayed in villages where every house had lost somebody, talking to British soldiers, to dog-training Orangemen, to balaclava’d IRA members. The cover shows him walking through a dangerously empty countryside. Wherever he is – Spain, Antrim, London’s concrete cultural heart – he is at home with that risky observation of other people which being foreign brings.

Colm Toibin comes from Enniscorthy, a small town outside Wexford. His father, a schoolteacher, wrote local history (the 1798 Rising took place in the town), founded the museum there, and died when Colm Toibin was 12. That loss, as well as a profound sense that history explains the present but should never be allowed to boss it around, informs his work. Reading became a way of making up for it. “Sartre, Camus, Hemingway - all three had an enormous effect on me. So did Bergman films. The impact of stumbling into *Cries and Whispers* as a young student was devastating. Bergman is in everything I do.” He finished his degree at University College, Dublin (“Joyce’s university,” he says in that airy Irish way which reminds English writers how Joyce and Beckett are theirs) and got out.

“Henry James’s father took his family to Europe: he didn’t feel they’d get a sensuous education in America. If I’d only known there was such a thing, I’d have got out as a baby – away from clouds, Catholicism, caution.” He taught English in Barcelona. “I learned two languages badly, Spanish and Catalan, read, got drunk every night I could. It was great – drugs, sex and rock’n’roll, only I was no good at drugs and didn’t like rock’n’roll. After three years I came home, educated.”

Franco died while he was in Spain. He watched the transition to democracy – “I was on every demonstration” – and returned to join a legendary generation of Irish journalists. “We wanted to be Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe. I learnt to be a novelist through journalism. Journalism got the poison out of me, over the issues that bother me – the IRA, intellectual nationalism, the Church, conservative, soft-spoken government. I didn’t need to put the anger into novels.”

His settings swing from Ireland to a Spanish elsewhere. His first novel was Spain (*The South*), the second Wexford (*The Heather Blazing*), the third Argentina (*The Story of the Night*). His new novel *The Black-water Lightship* (Picador, £15) returns to Wexford, but always with that alien perspective. He writes in alien places, too. “I wrote *The South* in Lisbon. There was terrible noise from a rock festival. I’d paid for the room, so I asked for a card table, and wrote in the toilet.”

And what is an Irish novel? “One of the greatest Irish writers was Henry James. He was appalled by Ireland but his grandfather came from Cavan. They were displaced Protestants - the most Irish Irish you could have.” Hmm. Apart from James, Toibin is on his own. Though set in Argentina, *The Story of the Night* was the first male gay Irish novel; and *The Blackwater Lightship* the first set in Ireland. Toibin brushes that aside. “The foreground is love and loss. Contemporary Ireland, people being given freedom they did not have before – not only to be gay – that’s the background.”

Hang on. His dad analysed the impact of railways on 19th-century Irish provincial life; he trained his own exacting historical consciousness to New Journalistic standards. Isn’t the society experiencing love and loss his target too? He’s writing Irishness as deep as Roddy Doyle, but a different kind – the newly affluent middle-class of mobile phones and motorways. His work is photo-sensitive to – and can be very funny about – the social-cum-emotional significance of objects. Here he’s dramatising love and loss through two lots of people – middle Ireland, the gay community – who have shape-changed radically in 30 years. Isn’t he exploring the impact of change on them through love and loss, as much as love and loss through them?

“It’s probably true. If there is a political foreground, it’s the clash between traditional beliefs and an open economy. New electrical gadgets, new ways of being in a house – changes I saw as a child which have accelerated in the last 10 years. Belief in two knocks at the door when someone is dying – people at home believe that today – alongside mobile phones. In a very closed society, we’ve

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moved in 20 years from knocks on the door to home computers. Yes. I'm interested in the effect that has on people".

How come his Ireland is so different from Doyle's? "Everyone writing in Ireland re-invents the place. In my generation, Dermot Bolger and Roddy Doyle meant that homes never before considered part of the national culture became national culture overnight. In 1973, Ireland joined the EEC, John Banville's *Birchwood* came out, and Irish consciousness stopped wanting to be Catholic Nationalist... and wanted to be urbanely European." Alongside Doyle's adventurers, Toibin choreographs middle-class Irish privacies. As he wrote about the poet Paul Durcan, "What happens inside the family in Ireland remains so secretive, so painfully locked within each person that any writer who deals with the dynamics of family life stands apart."

In conversation, Toibin is mischievous as a mongoose, but his prose is famous for its pared sentences. The humour is quick, understated, in the dialogue. He once wrote poems and has just done a radio programme about contemporary poetry. "From poetry, especially Elizabeth Bishop, I found the more you leave out the more powerful it is."

He knows literary London inside out but still finds Englishness hilariously mysterious. (Or says he does.) He's off to a party. "Should I stay as I am?" he asks. "Or put on a white shirt? Maybe the white shirt?" He is, after all, the Henry James of Enniscorthy, though more economical with adjectives. Instead of America-meets- Europe, you get the meeting of 19th- and 20th-century Ireland.

Both novelists address human communication and its failure. In Toibin's new novel, a lighthouse stands guard over mutual self-discoveries in minds cloistered together by love for a young man dying of Aids. It is Toibin's big theme: how divided people – straight and gay, hurt daughter and careerist mum – try and often fail to understand each other, fitfully illumined by stares across the dark, estranging, loss-filled sea between them. Of course he should wear his white shirt. ■

## Harold Masterson 1947-2005



*"I just got back after a long two weeks and it is 2.45 AM, I do not think that I will sleep at all tonight, but I will light a candle and have a beer before going to bed. I think that he would not mind me having a pint.*

*Not having much of a family the IFRC became my home. Somehow, he was always there for me so he became he was/is my family and always will be. I am sad... very sad, too sad to say more, but deep down I know that we will meet again. I will miss him."*

Message from an IFRC field delegate after hearing the news of Harold's death.

A packed funeral service was held on Thursday, August 18 at the church of St. Gervais in Geneva for Harold Masterson, a senior figure in the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) and a founding member of the Geneva Literary Aid Society.

Harold died peacefully in Geneva's University Hospital on August 11. He had lapsed into a coma after suffering a heart attack at his home on August 1.

A native of Lisbellaw, Co. Fermanagh, and 58-years-old when he died, Harold had served in many capacities during almost 25 years with the Red Cross and Red Crescent both in the field and at the Geneva HQ.

He was particularly revered for his ability to prepare and mentor young aid workers prior to taking up their field assignments.

As one former colleague remarked, "He was the conscience of the International Federation and always knew how to go straight to the heart of any matter in a sincere and thoughtful way. He is a huge loss to the Red Cross and Red Cross Movement."

And a huge loss to his family, friends and colleagues.

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## THANKS

The Geneva Literary Aid Society would like to thank the following individuals and organizations for their support in getting this series of "Close Encounters" with famous writers off to a successful start:

Take4 featuring Vic Pitts  
The Anglo Irish Bank (Suisse) SA  
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Colm Toibin  
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The organising committee for this event comprised: Brian Tisdall (ICRC), Claire Geraty (WHO), Chris Black (WHO), John Black, Catali Black, Sophie Barton-Knott (UNAIDS), James Casey (CERN), Claire Harron (UNAIDS), John Donnelly (Cite Universitaire), Denis McClean (SITA) and Mark Willis (Global Fund).

## TAKE4

The wonderful professional musicians playing for you tonight and providing their services free of charge for a good cause are Angela Higney, Elizabeth Royer, Rick Troxel, Piero Calvi, and hopefully, the inimitable Vic Pitts on drums (trying to reorganize his busy schedule as we went to press). Take4 can be contacted through Piero Calvi on 078-8490669 and gig regularly in Geneva and the surrounding region. They have a wonderful repertoire which includes jazz, blues, soul and rock and roll. Just the group to liven up your marriage celebrations or Christmas party. And they are great fun.

## WATCH THIS SPACE

GLAS hopes to announce dates soon for a Close Encounter with Robert Fisk, the renowned war correspondent, talking about his new book. Our first theatrical event of the new season will be a production of Samuel Beckett's Molloy by the Gare St. Lazare Players; Beckett's centenary looms in 2006. All proceeds from GLAS events go towards supporting People Living with HIV/AIDS.

<http://www.theglas.org>