

DAILY NEWS

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Prisoners' last words haunt writer

James McSherry vaguely remembers his stepgrandfather pushing him on the swings in the playground 40 years ago. That was his image of the old man, Michael O'Rourke, who had come from County Cork to the Bronx after the Irish warred with the British and then with each other in the 1920s.

About 10 years ago, McSherry discovered a family secret about O'Rourke, and a piece of history: an incredible artifact whose fragile pages spell out tales of honor, courage and humor in the face of death.

Now he's trying to spread the story.

"It's a project of passion," he said.

McSherry, 46, was born in Castle Hill, one of five kids, but was raised for much of his youth by his grandparents in Throgs Neck, where he still lives.

He has been a teacher at Lehman High School — he graduated from Lehman — for 16 years, teaching film and writing courses.

It was while cleaning up after a flood in his mother's Williamsbridge apartment in the 1990s — "she was running the bathtub and forgot" — that McSherry saw something floating in the living room. The item was carefully wrapped in plastic and sealed inside a Ziploc bag.

"I thought, my God this is valuable," he said. "Thank God it didn't get too damaged."

It is a small, black, leather-bound book with gold-engraved cover: "Autographs." It has pastel-colored pages, and looks like any autograph album kids used to pass around after graduation, with farewells like "2 soon 2 be 4 gotten."



Around the Bronx

With Patrice O'Shaughnessy

O'Rourke had given it to McSherry's mother as a sort of family heirloom. He told her he had smuggled it out of Mountjoy Prison in Dublin, where he had served time as a political prisoner during the Irish Civil War, when those opposed to the 1921 treaty with the British engaged in a fierce war with supporters of the new Free State.

"Somehow, my grandfather got it out of the prison. He felt there was something important about it," McSherry said.

"My mother said, 'You want to be a writer, you take it. I have no use for it. Do something with it someday,'" McSherry recalled.

"I read through it that night. . . . I was blown away."

The final words of men who were to be executed for their violence against supporters of the treaty are written in beautiful penmanship. Some have intricate drawings. Some are poetry. They are a timeless testament to the human spirit.

"They don't harbor ill will toward their captors," said McSherry, shaking his head.

"I see the prisons fallen, iron gates worn to the thinness of Arachne's web, and sad-eyed men made glad," wrote Joseph Campbell, No. 2 Tintown Internment Camp, Hut 72, March 2, 1923.

Liam Mellows, who was a famous figure in Irish freedom, had contributed to a notebook of writings called "The Book of Cells" while in the prison, and McSherry's diary contains "the last letter of Liam Mellows," written Dec. 8, 1922, the day Mellows was executed by firing squad with three others:

"God bless you boys and may he give you courage, fortitude and wisdom to suffer and endure (sic) all for Ireland's sake."

Patrick Hennessey wrote on Sept. 1, 1923: ". . . I am leaving my cigarettes to be divided among the Clare section . . . a cigarette to each one will go a long way. I forgive my enemies . . . from the bottom of my heart. . . ."

McSherry kept the autograph book in a secure place, thinking someday he'd do something with it, and finished writing his first book, which came out a few years ago.

"A Clean Street's a Happy Street" is a memoir of growing up in the Bronx in the 1960s and '70s, but it's not the typical stickball-and-egg-creams, Ozzie-and-Harriet memories.

The book tells of his mother's battles with mental illness and his father's drunkenness and violent death.

Rich with detail, you feel as if you're in the apartment with him when his father wakes the family one night to watch a streetfight, looking out the window with him onto E. Tremont Ave. as two shirtless men punch each other — a strange lesson in manhood and life from his dad.

And the scenes at his mother's bedside, as she passes away from lung disease are understated, poignant, and familiar.



James McSherry, with his daughter Paige, 7, holds up a drawing in prison diary written by his grandfather. Photo by Enid Alvarez

Now, McSherry is trying to make a documentary he calls "Autographs: The Mountjoy Prison Diaries." He is looking for a producer and wants to go to Ireland to research the prison — and maybe find relatives of the men who wrote messages in the book in a dark chapter of Irish history. He envisions notable Irish actors reading the entries of the doomed prisoners.

He lets people see the diary sparingly, keeps it wrapped in a cloth bag and locked away.

"I'm very passionate about this," he said. "I don't want to just hand it over to somebody."

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