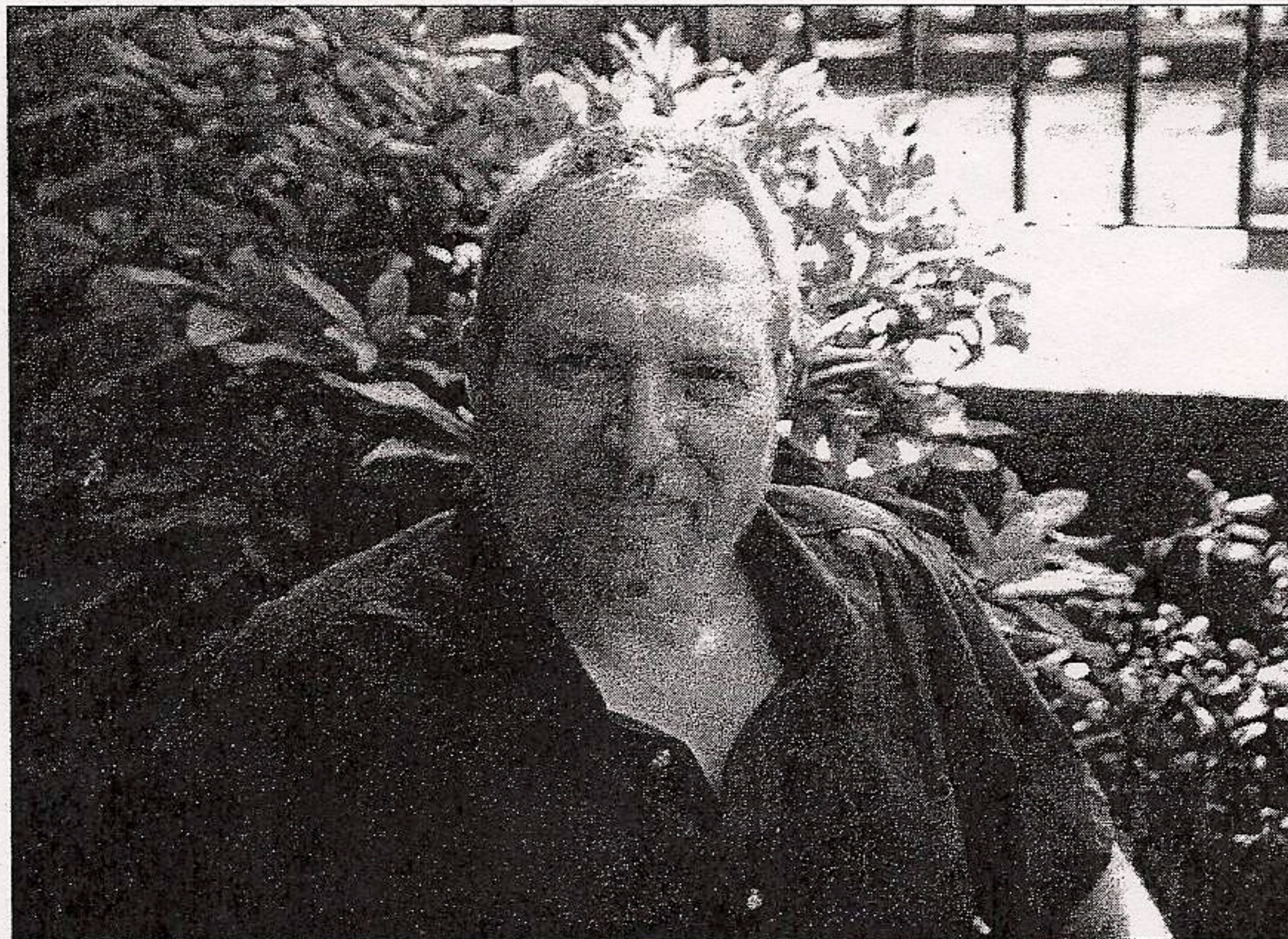


By Steve Camelio

Despite being raised during the "Golden Age of Television" in the United States, Dermot McEvoy didn't develop his storytelling skills from watching "The Honeymooners" or "I Love Lucy." Instead, reared in a family steeped in the Irish oral tradition, he was regaled with tales of his family's homeland, some of the stories no doubt older than his adopted country. He was entertained with fantastic ghost stories, folklore tales of banshees and curses that had been passed down through the generations. He also heard the real and often tragic tales of Mother Ireland's heroic sons and daughters, gone but not forgotten. With an upbringing like that, it stands to reason that McEvoy's first book, "Terrible Angel: A Novel of Michael Collins in New York" (Lyons Press) would intertwine the heroic and fantastic branches of the Irish storytelling tradition into a gritty yet out-of-this-world Irish-American tale that spans the past, present and future.

The novel, which is set in New York City's Greenwich Village in 1994, is being published Oct. 16, the 112th anniversary of the birthday of Michael Collins, an Irish patriot and IRA founder who died in 1922. It follows the ghost of Collins as he is sent down from heaven to plan a prison break for an Irishman before he is deported to Britain to serve life in prison for a crime that he did not commit. Collins's heavenly overseers make his assignment more difficult by telling him that his soul will be in jeopardy if he has to resort to the violent tactics that helped him bring the British to their knees and the bargaining table in 1920. Luckily, Collins is aided in implementing his escape plan — equal parts espionage, politics, prayers, and slight of hand — by some true-life New York characters and friends of



Novelist Dermot McEvoy cut his literary teeth at the old Lion's Head in Greenwich Village.

Patriot Game

In new novel, Michael Collins hits the Greenwich Village haunts

the author and a little, surprise-surprise, luck of the Irish.

Following the old axiom "write what you know," McEvoy didn't have to stray far from his Manhattan home to come up with the setting, themes, and plot of "Terrible Angel." Born in Dublin in 1950, McEvoy moved with his family to the West Village in 1954 and never left. Seeing that the Irish populated most of the Village at that time, it was easy for the McEvoy family to keep the Irish tradition of storytelling alive and well in America.

"My uncles would come from the Bronx and everyone would sit around our apartment at the corner of West 4th and West 13th Streets and drink and tell stories," McEvoy said recently.

As a child, his mother and father's ghost stories entertained McEvoy, but his family also made sure he learned his Irish history.

"My uncles Joe and

Frank Kavanagh were both officers in the IRA at the same time as Collins and my parents were both Fenians," McEvoy said. "I grew up hearing stories about Collins and I was brought up believing revolutionaries are good people, not terrorists."

After growing up hearing the old tales and even telling a few of his own, McEvoy's love of the spoken and written word was further developed while studying British Literature ("All the writers were Irish," he says) at New York City's Hunter College, working for the Manhattan publishing houses Doubleday and Random House, and, most recently, writing for Publisher's Weekly. Perhaps more important, McEvoy also started frequenting the West Village's Lion's Head Saloon, the 39 Christopher St. watering hole that catered to New York City's yarn spinning and writing elite from 1966-96. Norman Mailer, Pete Hamill, Jimmy Breslin, Joe Flaherty and a then unpublished high school English teacher named Frank McCourt were all regulars when McEvoy started showing up for a pint or two.

"The oral tradition was alive and well at the Lion's Head," McEvoy said. "The late Joe Flaherty became my mentor, always encouraging me to write. He was a great storyteller and the funniest man you'll ever meet."

Flaherty and the Lion's Head had such a profound impact on McEvoy that he made the pub

Collins's headquarters, his home away from heaven, in his novel. So as not to be a bad neighbor, the rest of McEvoy's home neighborhood of Greenwich Village also plays a starring role in the novel.

"Since Collins never came to New York, I wanted some place he would feel comfortable, a place similar to the Dublin he knew," McEvoy said. "Maybe it's all the crooked streets and the similar types of people, but Dublin and the Village have an energy that a lot of cities don't have."

McEvoy is also quick to point out that there is also a lot of Irish history nestled in the warren of lanes and alleyways that are Greenwich Village, as well as in New York City in general.

"The American Fenian John Devoy lived in the Village, right around the corner from the Lion's Head," McEvoy said. "O'Donovan Rossa and Tom Clarke, both members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood, lived on Staten Island."

By evoking names and places in "Terrible Angel" that Collins once knew, McEvoy forces Collins to examine his life and the actions that made him a hero.

"He did a lot of bad things and sent a lot of good men to do bad things," McEvoy said. "That eats away at my Collins over the course of the novel."

McEvoy says "my Collins" because, just as McEvoy had an easy job writing about his home

neighborhood and old friends, when it came to reconstructing Michael Collins, a larger-than-life figure who died 72 years ago in an ambush by former colleagues in Cork, things were a little different. Dying at the age of 31 Collins left behind very little firsthand evidence about what went through his mind during some of the most defining moments in Irish history. No one really knows how "The Big Fellow," as Collins was known, felt about ordering the "Bloody Sunday" assassinations of 14 British intelligence officers in Dublin in 1920 or signing the treaty with the British in 1921 that gave the British rule over Northern Ireland while creating the Irish Free State and essentially igniting the Irish Civil War.

Fittingly, it seems that even when Collins was alive he took on a ghostly aura as he and his dozen right hand men, nicknamed the Twelve Apostles, time and again struck quickly at the British intelligence forces before disappearing into the Dublin mist.

"There are few pictures or motion pictures of him, no recording of his voice, and no autobiography," McEvoy said. Still McEvoy would not be deterred.

"I did a lot of research, read his love letters to Kitty Kiernan, examined his actions before and after he signed the treaty, and then inferred a lot to create his personality for Terrible Angel," he said.

Luckily Collins's actions spoke volumes, presenting the picture of an unwavering leader — a man credited with defining guerrilla warfare, as we know it — who relied heavily on his intelligence, creativity, and ability to adapt to difficult situations at the drop of a hat. While any one of these attributes that McEvoy unearthed about Collins would make "The Big Fellow" the perfect time traveler, none turned out to be the sole reason McEvoy alone chose Collins as the lead for "Terrible Angel" from the vast lexicon of Irish heroes.

"It's very simple," he said, "he's the only one who got the British out of the 26 counties. Everyone else tried but Collins wouldn't rest till he did it."

There's no rest in sight for McEvoy either. Despite just publishing his first novel, he's already finishing up his second novel, "Craic-Heads: A Novel of Greenwich Politics in the Decadent '90s," and hopes to have it published in the fall of 2004.

And what about Michael Collins? Will he rest in peace? Don't bet on it, said a smiling McEvoy. "I already have the first line of the sequel to "Terrible Angel" written: "Heaven wasn't all it was cracked up to be," thought Michael Collins." That seems to be keeping with both men's traditions.

"Terrible Angel: A Novel of Michael Collins in New York," published by Lyons Press, will be available Oct. 16.

