

LOCAL & STATE

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IRISH HERITAGE MONTH

Lecture series to close with 'Our Own Kind'

University of Rhode Island professor Scott Molloy will discuss Edward McSorley's book 'Our Own Kind' tonight.

By James A. Johnson
Staff writer

A novel published in 1946 tells the story of a young Irishman growing up in Rhode Island in the early part of the 20th century.

"Our Own Kind" written by Edward McSorley drew rave reviews at the time and has been called the "Angela's Ashes" tale of Rhode Island.

The impact of McSorley's novel will be a major part of a lecture to be given tonight at 6 at the International Tennis Hall of Fame by Scott Molloy, an award-winning professor at the University of Rhode Island.

"This book is the only piece of fiction that I know of that tackles the history of the Irish in this state in any large format," Molloy said Sunday in his office in URI's Schmidt Labor Research Center in South Kingstown. "It's fiction, but it is so heavily and correctly steeped in Rhode Island history. There is no doubt in my mind that he is writing about growing up himself."

Molloy said he recognized many incidents and events mentioned in the novel, even though the names of those involved might have been changed.

"It's amazing how precise he is with all of

that," Molloy said. "It's interesting to read a piece of fiction that is so grounded in reality."

Molloy will give the fifth and final lecture in this year's Michael F. Crowley Lecture Series sponsored by the Museum of Newport Irish History. As of noon Sunday, 129 people had made reservations for the lecture, but close to 150 people are likely to show up, said a spokeswoman for the museum. That would set a record for the lecture series, which is at least 10 years old.

Although "Our Own Kind" has been highly acclaimed and sold more than 600,000 copies when it was first published, little is known of its author, Molloy said.

It's known that McSorley was a fisherman, a farmer, a press agent for vaudeville and a journalist for The Providence Journal, but Molloy has been able to uncover little more in the research. Although McSorley was buried in Rhode Island, it is not known where.

He wrote two other novels that did not do very well. That is also true of Frank McCourt, author of "Angela's Ashes," Molloy said. McCourt wrote other novels after that but none had the success of "Angela's Ashes."

McSorley's novel is about Willie McDermott, who was raised in the Irish Catholic section of Providence by his grandfather, Ned, in a time when help wanted ads said, "No Irish need apply." At his grandfather's urging, Willie sets his sights on going to college. Those dreams are never realized, and he is forced to get a job after his grandfather dies.

Molloy said he learned about "Our Own Kind" from a professor at Bryant University, who told him to get that book if he wanted to know about the Irish in Rhode Island.

"Once I read it, I knew who I was, where I came from and what it was all about," Molloy said.

Those reading it today see it as a flattering look at the Irish, but that was not always the case in 1946," Molloy said.

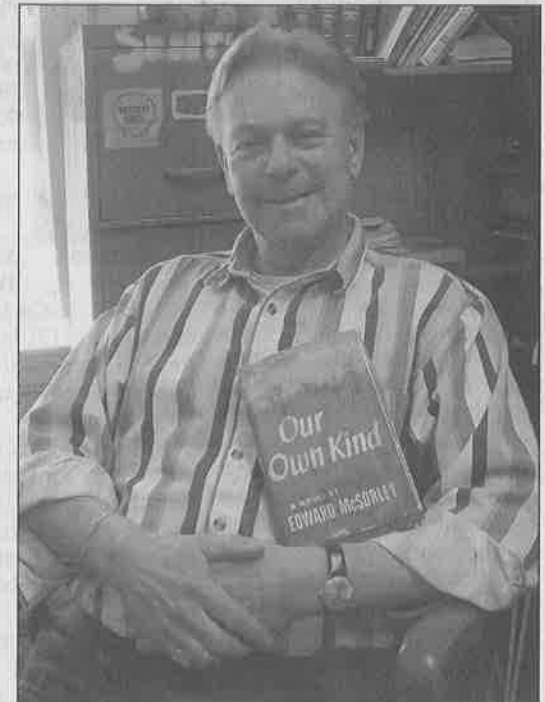
"People were amazed to see an author who was not afraid to take pop shots at his own community," he said. "The Irish were portrayed as hypocritical, prejudiced and some times as their own worst enemies. That really opened a lot of eyes in Rhode Island. Some applauded it, and some did not. They figured the Irish should keep their problems to themselves."

When the novel was published, the New York Times praised it as "a touching portrait of a fine man" and "truly a creative work of fiction." The Chicago Tribune called it "one of the finest novels to see print in a long time." In selecting it, the Book of the Month Club said McSorley "belongs in the seat of the literary greats."

Molloy uses the novel alongside "Angela's Ashes" in his classes at URI.

"Some of it is minutia but it is so powerful," he said of McSorley's novel. "It gives you a sense that you were there so many years ago. You really don't get that in many places."

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James A. Johnson photo

Professor Scott Molloy holds a copy of 'Our Own Kind' in his University of Rhode Island office in South Kingstown. He will discuss the novel, by Edward McSorley, tonight at the International Tennis Hall of Fame.