

Remembering

Bob Reilly

By Robert U. Guthrie

This is a love story. Grab your hankies

Robert Thomas Reilly loved writing. He loved his 10 children. He loved his wife, Jean. He even loved his work serving as the public relations director at Creighton University for 16 years. He loved Ireland and being Irish. And he loved his religion. He wrote about all these things, but mostly about Ireland and a most incredible and touching story about his wife's decline in Alzheimer's.

There were the novels: *Rebels in the Shadows*, about the legendary secret society of the Molly Maguires, formed to battle the coalmine owners in the 1870s; *Red Hugh: Prince of Donegal*, turned into a Walt Disney movie, and now in its fourth edition; *Irish Saints Come Along to Ireland*; *Christ's Exile*; *Public Relations in Action*; and another half dozen including co-authored books such as *Historical Omaha: An Illustrated History of Omaha and Douglas County* and *Lucky*, about the life of Charles Durham. He wrote television and movie scripts. In fact, in some 50 years, he wrote more than 1,000 articles, short stories and treatises in more than 100 national and regional publications. Bob Reilly was simply compelled to write.

"He could not, not write, said son Hugh. "My father was an *aman mor*, Irish for great soul. Such a person makes an impact on everyone he touches.

Matt Holland, son of Denny Holland, one of Bob's business associates and a friend, told Hugh about the time he and his family were busily cleaning the house after Matt's father had died. "We cleaned and cleaned, until there was nothing left to clean in that rambling three-story house.

By mid-afternoon they were drained of all energy and suffering the wound of having lost Denny Holland.

Matt told Hugh: At that moment, your dad appeared at the door with a box of crackers, some cheese and a box of cookies. He came in and said he had heard about my dad and knew he had to stop by.

We all sat in the front room as the winter afternoon light faded. Your dad began to tell stories, not about my dad, but about angels and runaway horses.

As he spoke, time seemed to stop.
"We thought about nothing but the images his stories created in our minds. After ... maybe an hour, maybe two, your dad got up and left as abruptly as he had arrived. But his stories had changed the day for us. We were different somehow, relaxed and at peace. That was Bob the shanachie, the Irish storyteller.

We became engaged in 1943, while was on leave, and Sean then waited almost two years for me to return from the Second world war She wrote to me evens dars, even when! was missing in action and she had no idea if i was alive or dead ...

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Bob, born in Lowell, Mass., was a lieutenant in Europe during World War II. He was captured just before the Battle of the Bulge, and he spent six months as a German prisoner of war. He married Regina McKenzie in 1945; she was forever hence known as Jean Reilly. Bob's roots in Lowell entwined with such luminaries as Ed McMahon, Johnny Carson s'sidekick; "beat generation writer Jack Kerouac; and Ray Goulding, of the comedic pair billed as Bob and Ray in the '50s. Bob's compulsion to write followed him even into the POW camp. He was one of few Americans in the camp whose prisoners were mostly British, New Zealanders and Australians. Together they would pass the time by exchanging recipes centering on the "best meal they ever had." Bob, typically, set about creating a book of recipes after the war, calling upon notes he made while a prisoner (Bob was an inveterate notetaker) and later contacting other POWs for their input.

Once, when placed in solitary confinement, where he could see nothing, let alone the outdoors, he used a pencil to enlarge a small hole, from which he could watch children playing some distance away. He had to write even then — poetry.

Just before Christmas in 1944, Hugh related, there was an attack on the camp. he British bombed his POW camp, by mistake obviously. The barracks that he was in housed somewhere between 70 and 80 men. A bomb came through

right by his bunk.

He was blown out of the hole created by the bomb and had an out-of-body experience (where he saw himself looking down at his own body). When he came to, he went back into the hole and rescued the only other survivor.

At the end of the war in Europe, when the Allies were advancing toward the camp, the German captors were considering moving the POWs closer to Germany's Nazi strongholds. "The head officer for the POWs was a Brit, said Hugh Reilly. "The British commander went to the German commander and told him, "Just want you to know that we have been making clubs, homemade knives and such and if you try to move

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Through the years ... Bob and Jean Reillys' marriage is a story of love, from their wedding in 1945 (see large photo at left) through the family's struggle with Alzheimer's to their deaths some six weeks apart. (Inset far left, Bob and Jean in Bob's beloved Ireland; near left, the couple at home a few weeks before Jean's death.)

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us, we will attack you.' The next day all
the Germans were gone.
Bob decided to run for the Second
District Congressional seat in 1970 in the
25th year of his marriage, and although
Jean worked in the travel industry, she
became a politician's wife.
Besides 10 children of their own, two
Boys Town residents adopted" the Reillys.
Jean said in the 1970 Reilly campaign
newspaper ""Just being den mother to
all those Reillys, is old hat ..."(it) is a
beautiful chaos that keeps you active.
(I met Bob in 1942) and soon Bob was
off to war, she said. "We had the standard
wartime V-mail courtship until Bob was
captured. ... The letters stopped coming
then, so I reread the old ones and prayed.
Then, in May 1945, Bob wrote that he
had been liberated and was on the way
home! We were married three weeks
later. I quickly learned of my husband's
compassion. We spent our honeymoon
visiting parents of the boys in Bob's
platoon who had been killed in action.
It was the kind thing to do, and I was
awfully proud of my new husband."
In 1995, we returned to Omaha
and raised our children there. Besides
Kathleen's deafness, three of our
youngsters had severe asthma,
and another had an eye tumor
removed at the Mayo Clinic....
Tronhought those challenging
years, jean bore the major domestic
responsibilities, always without
complaint. People remarked about
her serenity.... learned to admire
her instinctive wisdom.... All these
qualities made it seem doubly unjust
when she developed Alzheimer's.
When he wrote Red Hugh and sent it
to a publisher, he received a terrible
rebuff in which an editor blasted the
story as a terrible piece of writing. Bob
threw it out and started over, taking just
a couple of months to rewrite the entire
book on his old Royal manual typewriter,
all the while typing with just two fingers.
The resulting story not only sold, but
has gone to a fourth printing today and
gained the interest of Walt Disney a year
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before the master producer died. Bob

reckoned it was the last work to receive Walt's blessing directly.

Red Hugh premiered in Omaha at the old State Theater in 1966.

You can't talk about Bob without considering his competitive spirit. So many stories abound that it is difficult to pick just one. He was always playing wastebasket basketball in his office crumpling up endless pieces of paper after "false starts" on his next note for a book or article.

A tribute article most likely written by his friend, the late Harry Dolphin, BS'49, probably says it best:

Driveway basketball, another Reilly specialty, is suspect of a fix. Several small X's chalked on the drive are the only places he shoots from in his unerring game of Horse.

A word of warning — watch him in ping-pong on his home court. The large lamp and equally large paddle at his end of the table give him an edge on the visiting player at the dark end of the table with the postage-stamp-size paddle and the furnace room door that periodically swings into range of his backhand.

Bob's life was a living kaleidoscope of activity. In the late '60s, Bob started a travel agency (with Jean's experienced help) for tours of Ireland. He carried on with this until 1992, when his son Hugh took over. Out of the tours came an unfinished book on Irish pubs. Hugh may try to complete it, but its many pages now are outdated, since Bob quit work on it in the early '80s.

During one period, Bob took to the Omaha Playhouse stage. He won the Fonda-McGuire Award, and Henry Fonda and Dorothy McGuire presented the award to him. His television scripts included those for actors Lorne Greene and Michael Douglas.

His Irish books and his interest in Ireland came naturally. His mother and father were Irish. His grandfather was the first Reilly, of their family's heritage, born in the U.S., according to Hugh.

In his later years, Bob adopted a beard, which progressively whitened until his death. You could have put a green hat on him and people would have asked him the location of his gold. His Irish twinkle, his general "lift" on St. Patrick's Day, his

storytelling penchant, and that pure white beard ... all lent a leprechaun-like air. Some Hears ago i had lunch with the late actor Pat o'Erien, who gave me tis memorable line: Apriest frend of lis had deserbed hearng the Confesstons ofmuns as "being stoned to death with popcor. Sometimes the careoiver's role is like that. No major tantmns or hallueinations but, rather, a senes of small diffieulties. ke things being moved to uufamiliar locales, Te sugar bowl travels to the freezer, bananas join the silverware, dirtij clothes fraternize with the cleaw. Te Alzheimer's patient micht want to help with the cooking and mix peanut butter with the egos and then burn that concoction. Or fill the steam tron with liauid starch. Or fold evensting in sight, making 50 neat squares out of a toilet paper roll. Photo courtesy of Hugh Reilly Reilly family photo, taken around 1966. Left to right, front row: Pegeen and Michael; second row: Kathleen, Bob and Jean; third row: Hugh, Moira and Donal; fourth row: Eileen, Colleen, Michaela and Christine.

Hugh talks about his mother and father: "My mom and dad were a matched set. They pulled together. They had great fun with each other.

"I remember my mother telling me one time, You know, Hugh, if your father wanted to, he could be president of the United States.' That's how she felt about him. He felt the same way about her — that there wasn't much she could not do. He left a lot of the childrearing to her. He would come home from work and go upstairs and write.

He teased her and they had great fun together. I remember one time we had cream pies, two or three of them. Dad said, Talways wanted to do this, and he picked up one of the pies and threw it at Mom ... but he missed. Mom had one of the pies at the other end of the table. She threw it at him and she nailed him. She was laughing and he was laughing. Another time I remember them chasing each other around the backyard with water hoses.

acknowledge my lack of professional skills, but I did bring things to the table: love this patient; have a history with her; understand her needs, know her likes and dislikes; provide familiarity and security and a certain level of comfort. I know the house and environment. I knew I was a link to a past already damaged. When Alzheimer's first intruded in their life, Hugh noticed the change in his father. At first he was impatient, but he developed patience with my mother. He would get angry with her... saying, I told you that before, when she began to lose track. She would get defensive and he would feel terrible. That didn't last long. He came to terms with it. And her (decline) happened over a 10-year period.

"My mother had fallen and hit her head and we figured, Well, maybe that's what's causing it.

Mom doubled the average life span of those diagnosed with Alzheimer's. Her body gradually shut down. People think they die of other things, like pneumonia. But they don't. They die of Alzheimer's. She lost her swallowing reflex and could not eat or drink. By then she was in hospice.

There are many variations of love,
but I'm not talking about the kind
that flares up and burns brightly
at a time. I mean the kind that can
bank like a good fire against the
certain cold and dark.

Aud duty. I was brought up
respecting duty, which means you
continue to do something even when
the reasons have dissipated. Call it
commitment.

Bob was educated at Creighton
University and earned an advanced
degree at Boston University.
He was an instructor, alumni
secretary, director of special resources
and director of public relations during
his 16 years at Creighton.

In 1966, he became a vice president
and partner in the public relations firm
of Holland, Dreves and Reilly.

He became a professor at the
University of Nebraska at Omaha in
1972 and retired as a full professor in
1987. He was named a professor emeritus,
and a chair in the communication
department bears his name.

Pray, of course, but not for cures
or miracles, pray for my wife's
continued health and serenity and
for my own understanding. I pray
that our children will also come to
terms with the situation and not fret
about this cross being visited on a
wonderful mother or this disease
tearing apart a couple still very much
I love. I want them to know that God
doesn't wish suffering on any one.

Jean's decline was gradual but
unremitting.

The first few years, she did some
kind of silly things, but she was
basically there, said Hugh. "The last
four or five years in the nursing home
she knew Bob. She knew him pretty
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much until the end. She would look at
us and she would maybe know that we
were important somehow, but she knew
Bob and she would ask for Bob.

Most days, Jean just sits there beside
me, rests her head on my shoulder
and dozes. Sometimes ... I show her
photos, sing to her, talk softly. On
Sundays I bring her Communion but,
more and more, she seems unaware

of what she is doing. I feel caught
between sacrament and sacrilege.
One day the nurse said, "tear up
eventime i see how excited she is to
see you."

Listen, I told her, for 60 years
that's the way I felt when she walked
to a room. The nurse chided at that.
"At the end, he was so tender to her.
We had brought her home and put up a
bed downstairs. Bob had a bed upstairs.
We moved Bob's bed down next to hers
near the end. He was happy with that.
On her last day, we put the two beds
next to each other downstairs.
He pushed the beds together. He
kind of sprawled across the two beds as
much as he could toward her. He would
stroke her hair and hold her hand.'
Some six weeks later, April 14, 2004,
Bob died in his sleep.

I have a certain conviction that
we will be together again and as
we used to be. I have had dreams
about that final reunion. I've seen
it in my mind a hundred times.

We're both dressed in white and
we're dancing in front of patio doors
open to the sea.

About the author: Guthrie is the former
editor of Creighton's Window Magazine.

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What Others Had to Say..

A Role Model

Bob Reilly was my friend and a role model.

I had known Bob for years when I decided to write a book about international adoption. I called him for advice.

He must have gotten hundreds of similar calls, most of which would never go beyond square one. He was probably too polite to say that.

Bob urged me to persevere because he liked my subject and respected me as a writer. He explained how to prepare a book proposal and offered leads for finding a publisher. He helped at every step until the book *How to Adopt A Child from Another Country* appeared. He brought a ream of copy paper to my publication party to encourage me to start another book.

I have modeled my journalism teaching career on his because he did everything I value so well. His former students raved about his classes. He published scholarly materials while continuing to write thoughtful and enjoyable articles and books for intelligent general audiences (like the readers of this magazine). He devoted countless hours to mentoring individual students.

Any encounter with Bob was a good time – the smile, the laugh, the wit, the story. You always learned something from him – even at his wake.

The night after Bob's wake, I attended a duty social event. As I sat at the table feeling sorry for myself, I thought about the story his sister, Barbara, had told about Bob's POW days when he was kept in solitary confinement. He had used a pencil to widen a hole in the wall to see a tiny bit of the world. Then he used the time to write a book of poems for Barbara at home.

I felt foolish. No wonder I had always admired Bob. Talk about a guy who knew how to make the most of whatever hand life dealt him!

Elleen M. Wirth

Chair

Journalism and Mass Communication

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Rely at work at his trusty Royal typewriter.

A Devoted Husband

When Bob Reilly reaches the Pearly Gates, St. Peter will recount his many talents and deeds. Clearly, there will be a long list of accomplishments punctuated with a significant grouping of adjectives. First and foremost, Bob was a devoted husband and father. Just to see him with his lovely wife, Jean, and their children, his love and admiration of them was clear. Over the course of Jean's long illness, Bob was ever the devoted spouse and cared for her often to the detriment of his own health.

Rosalee A. Roberts, APR,

Fellow PRSA

Longtime Vice President,

Public Relations

Bozell & Jacobs

A True Friend

He was a friend you could count on, one who walks in when the rest of the world walks out. When I was terminated from a job I loved, that very evening after the newspaper carried my career obituary, Bob Reilly was the first person at my home. There he stood, on my front porch, holding a bottle of Baileys Irish Cream and ready to help ease my pain. .. This Irish historian and steadfast supporter of the land of St. Patrick, reflected that love through his own spiritual strength. His love for his beautiful wife, Jean, is a model for all of us, and now they are together again.

Bil Ramsey

President,

Ramsey Public Relations

and a friend since 1952

An Irish Bard

Bob Reilly was an Irish Bard. What is often forgotten is that a storyteller must first have heard a story. Bob was the ultimate listener. He didn't soak up information like a sponge, he inhaled it like a vacuum sweeper

And once inside him, all the

information became part of his fabric to

the point where time, place, gender, ethnicity all lost their independence and Bob lived the tale. On a trip to Ireland with him every field, coast, tower, town and pub was presented to the visitor with the familiarity and insight of the centuries. Bob never shaded the truth about his beloved Ireland.

Bob was a competitor. I first encountered this side of him in the original Public Relations Office, a

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cramped and crowded rabbit warren
filled with desks and filing cabinets.
Hanging from a door was a basketball
hoop and a game was in progress.
Using a rolled-up wad of newspaper,
four bodies ricocheted off the furniture.
The scene was theatrical in that business
was being conducted by those few staff
not in the game. Bob was an audacious
player and never stopped talking as he
whirled in spectacular dashes among
the desks. This same tiny arena was the
site of a modified form of stickball.
Involving the use of a Whiffle golf ball
and a broom stick, endless running
games terrorized non-combatants.
Some of the greatest moments of my
life were spent in the presence of Bob
Reily and John Mulhall. The loss of
these two friends is compensated by
knowing that they now can argue with
one another freed from the exigencies of
time and space.

Allen B. Schlesinger

Professor Emeritus

Biology

A Family Man

The excitement was palpable the
morning Kathy (Bob's deaf daughter)
rushed into my classroom to tell me that
her father had talked on the telephone
with Walt Disney. Incredulously I said,
"The REAL Walt Disney?" She
reassured me as she explained that the
famous producer wanted to make a
movie from Bob's recently published
book, Red Hugh. Prince of Donegal.

I related this

happy episode to

Jean as she and I sat

in our room at the

Harold House Hote

in Edinburgh,

Scotland, in the

spring of 1991... I

shall always treasure

recalling one evening

as the phone rang in our room. Jean

answered and her face became radiant

when she heard Bob's voice. That

luminous expression never changed as

they continued their conversation and

made plans to meet in Ireland in the next day or two.

Sorting through numerous photographs of Bob and Jean, I am impressed that even an ordinary snapshot could reveal such deep affection, theirs was a union of faithful and caring love. When they spoke of their children, the dominant emotion was always the same — loving concern, justified parental pride in their accomplishments, and deep sorrow for their losses and unrealized goals.

Betty Dineen Shrier

Writer and close friend

A Respected Colleague

Bob and I alternated on a column in the Sun Newspapers in the 60s and 70s.

We got in the habit of showing each other whatever we'd most recently written.

There was his article on being a caregiver during Jean's Alzheimer's. Nothing he wrote was more revealing or touched people more deeply than that article in U.S. Catholic.

Other favorites of mine were the article he wrote about a train hitting a school bus, the one about a fatal accident (the scene in the church when Reilly behuind his desk in 1959 He worked at Creighton for 16 years as director of public relations victims families comtort the driver is a masterpiece of Christian grace and mercy), and the one for Creighton's magazine about the poetic Irishman, John Mulhall.

The school bus story starts a few seconds before the train will hit the bus. The crew sees it and knows they'll crash. The only question: Will all the kids flee in time? Bob holds the reader at that point and artfully delivers all the exposition — about such wrecks, about the crew, and especially about the bus driver and the kids on board, including young heroes who hustle their friends to safety.

I got tears in my eyes recalling these classic Reilly stories. I used his stories to show my class, and he used some of mine to teach his. It's a small part of our friendship, but a part I've already missed. I just finished a story for the

UNO Alum magazine " an article
about a very good man of faith,
wrestling coach Mike Denney. I wanted
so badly to show it to Bob.

Warren T. Francke

Active writer and retred UNO profesor

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