

John McAleer

Wrote novels, column, biography of Emerson

By Tom Long, Boston Globe Staff, 11/21/2003

Dr. John J. McAleer was a versatile author who wrote biographies of Transcendentalist guru Ralph Waldo Emerson and mystery writer Rex Stout as well as the highly regarded Korean War novel "Unit Pride."

Dr. McAleer, 80, who also taught English literature at Boston College for decades, died of cancer Wednesday in his home in Lexington.

The author's subject matter and genre varied widely, from book reviews to the mystery "Coign of Vantage: The Boston Athenaeum Murders," to a book on the philosophical writings of Theodore Dreiser.

"No matter what the subject, he attacked everything with the same enthusiasm," his son, John J. III of Lexington, said yesterday.

He could come up with a story for every occasion. "He was so well-read and so well-rounded, he knew a little something about everything," said his granddaughter, Molly McAleer of Lexington.

As one might suppose, he read widely. "Everything from murder mysteries to Harry Potter," said his granddaughter, a student at Boston College. And he lived in a home bursting with books from the basement to his bedroom.

Dr. McAleer was born in Cambridge. While an Army sergeant in India during World War II, he became an acquaintance of Mahatma Gandhi. When Dr. McAleer asked the pacifist philosopher for words to live by, Gandhi quoted "The Sage of Concord," Ralph Waldo Emerson: "Speak the rude truth in all ways."

In the introduction to his biography of Emerson, Dr. McAleer wrote that those words set him on the course he'd lead the rest of his life.

>Dr. McAleer earned bachelor's and master's degrees from Boston College and a doctorate at Harvard University.

Dr. McAleer's "Unit Pride" was published in 1981. It grew out of his visits and 1,200 letters exchanged with Billy Dickson, a bank robber imprisoned at the state prison in Walpole.

"The book is basically Dickson's autobiographical account of his experiences in Korea," Dr. McAleer said in a story published in the Globe in 1980. "I fleshed out some of the characters from my war experiences in North Africa and India, but most of the experiences are his, and they're all true."

Between March 1966 and June 1967, the two produced a 1,000-page manuscript. "Every page of it, whether delivered through the mail or by me, was read by the [prison] censor," said Dr. McAleer. "But to his everlasting credit, the censor never censored a word."

Dickson never lived to see the book published. Dr. McAleer helped persuade the Parole Board to release Dickson from prison in 1967 and helped him get a job, but Dickson was stabbed to death in a dispute in 1973.

In "Coign of Vantage: The Boston Athenaeum Murders," Dr. McAleer evoked a slice of less-than Puritan Boston. An excerpt: "The rush hour traffic climbing Beacon Hill moved at a sluggish crawl. And there we were, caught smack-dab in the middle of it, Boston Common to our right and, to our left, a solid phalanx of noble 19th-century houses, their occasional rheumy purple windows leering at us like lewd men who relished our impotence."

In 1989, he revealed that the inspiration for his murder-mystery came obliquely from students in his class on crime-writing. "People kept asking me what mysteries I'd written," he said in a story published in the Globe, "so I thought I'd better produce one. My academic field has been the novel of manners, and detective fiction is really a spinoff of that genre."

Dr. McAleer also wrote a biography of Concord contrarian Henry David Thoreau as well as dozens of book reviews for The Boston Globe and the "Family Man" column published in the Globe in the 1960s.

In his opening column he wrote: "When a man nearing 40 fathers a houseful of children, he's likely to become a crosspatch (an angry fool) or a philosopher. I didn't think it would be too much fun for the kids to have a grouchy father -- and a mother who told them every night 'Run children and hide! Your father's home.' I decided to try something else."

And he did manage to take a different path. "He read to us every night," his oldest daughter, Mary Alycia O'Brien of Dorchester, recalled yesterday.

Besides his son, daughter, and granddaughter, he leaves his wife, Ruth (Delaney); two other daughters, Saragh Delaney Hoey of Marshfield and Seana C. McAleer of Lexington; two other sons, Andrew S. of Lexington and Paul B. of Norwood; a brother, Robert E., of Brighton; a sister, Katherinanne Schneiderat of Manchester, N.H.; and six other grandchildren.

A funeral Mass will be said at 10 a.m. tomorrow in Sacred Heart Church in Lexington. Burial will be in Cambridge Catholic Cemetery.