

# Going home again with Pete Hamill

By Pat Fenton

letters@irishecho.com

The sun splashed along the tops of the factory buildings in Tribeca, highlighting the rows and rows of water tanks on this perfect fall morning. As I came up from the A Train at Canal Street and started to walk downtown to interview Pete Hamill, my mind wandered back to a long ago time in the 1970s when I sent him a sample of my first, early uncertain words. He was writing for the Village Voice at the time. The next week I got back a long, type-written letter from him that urged me to keep writing.

And throughout his career he did that over and over again with so many other writers just starting out.

Standing in his Tribeca loft I commented on the walls and walls of books he has. Lining a long hallway are book shelves reaching from floor to ceiling, holding over a thousand books.

"I call them the tenements," he says. "The Irish tenement is over from where you're standing. Then there's France, and Italy and Spain. And over there are all my books."

The one book that stands out the most in his section of "the tenements" is a book about his mother called "Anne Devlin Hamill, An Irish-American Odyssey." The Hamill family put it together. It is turned so that the full cover of the large book is facing the room. On the front of it is a picture of her as a young Belfast woman, her eyes filled with hope as she stares out at an image of the Statute of Liberty.

"Did you call the neighborhood Park Slope when you were growing up in Brooklyn?" I ask him. "A lot of people who came from Windsor Terrace always just called the whole neighborhood the Slope."

"Where I lived on 7th Avenue and 12th Street we really didn't call it anything," he says. "What I loved about the South Brooklyn Boys, as they called themselves, Junior Persico and those guys, they lived in North Brooklyn. When you looked at the map you realized that. But they called themselves the South Brooklyn Boys. Geography was not one of their strong suits," he says smiling, as he talks about a neighborhood street gang, many who went on to become part of the Mafia. Junior, aka, Carmine the Snake Persico, would become the Boss of the Colombo crime family.

"So my neighborhood was this unnamed place, between Park Slope and Windsor Terrace. But now it's been renamed by the real-estate guys as the South Slope."



Pete Hamill will be presented with the Eugene O'Neill Lifetime Achievement Award on Monday, Oct. 20, by the Irish American Writers & Artists.

## DIFFERENT, NOT BETTER

He talks about talking to a local real-estate guy on 7th Avenue a few years ago while working on a story about how the neighborhood changed. The man, John Burke, who grew up here, once made his living working a milk-truck route.

"I remember asking him, the new people arriving here, what are they like compared to what we were like? He said, 'we came from barracks. They came from dorms.' And I'm not against it by the way. You know I hear people bitching about the yuppies, but gentrification is better than heroin."

"How would you describe your childhood growing up in Brooklyn and the kids that are growing up there now?" I ask.

"It was simpler. There were various reasons for it. One was there was no television. We had radio, serials, we had Captain Midnight, Jack Armstrong."

"Does that make it better?" I say, "Or is it more complicated than that?"

"No, I think it makes it different. It's not whether it's better or worse. It's better now in so many ways. Race is so much better. It's infinitely better than when I was a kid and Jackie Robinson came. Although most of the people where I was were all for Robinson. He could hit the ball, you know, put men on bases."

"There were opportunities. The reason for that is the GI Bill. That really changed everything. The fact that you could

go to the university. I didn't know a single person who ever went to a university. Until later when I got older and was in the Navy and some guys had gone and were urging me, and other of my fellow dropouts to make sure I get the GED and then go on and go to the university."

"I don't know if the drug situation is better now than when the heroin arrived in our neighborhood in 1951. And that changed lives for the worst. You know 17th Street in Windsor Terrace where you came from was one of the worst hit."

He then mentions an institution that was a favorite of his father's and that he has written about often in his newspaper columns, and in his books.

"If you go over there," he says, pointing, "you'll find a picture of Rattigan's Bar on my desk."

Rattigan's Bar is the place where it all goes back to for Pete Hamill, a safe place where much of his life began in a tough Irish working-class neighborhood of dock workers and cops, a place he often calls, "the parish." And there he stands in the old black-and-white picture, forever young at 20, a whole new world outside waiting for him, a world he could never imagine looking through the windows of Rattigan's Bar.

The picture is placed on the coffee table in front of him, and it stirs up memories as he looks down at it.

"This is me here," he says as

he points to a long ago picture of a young Pete Hamill just home from the Navy, not knowing that one day he would be far away from this safe Irish working-class world and writing about people like Frank Sinatra, people that once only existed for him inside a juke box. And drinking with them. And dating people like Jackie Kennedy and the movie star Shirley MacLaine.

"There's Jack Daugherty, and Frank Cioffi. That's Patty Rattigan behind the bar. I'm not sure who this is. But that's the place. Almost every corner had a bar," he says, as he takes me back to his "drinking-life days."

"You had Diamond's on the corner of 9th Street and 7th Avenue, and Denny's directly across on the other side. You came up from the subway and there it was."

"Then the next block over on 10th Street was Fitzgerald's and 11th Street was Rattigan's. On 12th Street was Unbeatable Joe's. Quigley's was on 13th Street. There was nothing on the corner of 14th Street and 7th Avenue. That's where the Minerva movie house was. They insisted that it be treated like a religious institution," he says, smiling at the memory of a place he once spent so many innocent Saturday afternoons in his youth.

But there was also violence mixed in with the innocence of the neighborhood. Previously, he had recalled for me on the phone an evening in the 1950s when a young gang member from the Tigers, Giacomo Fortunato, was shot and killed at a gang fight with the South Brooklyn Boys that took place at nearby Prospect Park's Swan Lake. The next day a group of the Tigers stood under the marquee of the Minerva, some of them crying as they read the news of his death in the newspapers.

"The bars were all so very important to the neighborhood. It was not just the fun they would have, and the jokes in these places. The men could meet the local ward-heeler who would come around once a week, and they could do some kind of favor for someone who was going to give them six votes forever. The whole family would. And they got jobs. I remember clearly guys saying 'Jeez, I just heard that they are hiring at American Can.' Which was out in Bush Terminal in Bay Ridge. And that was where they had to go to work."

"These were guys who didn't duck the war, but it was for reasons like my father who had one leg, and now what are you going to do, put him in the infantry? [His father, Billy, lost his leg after being injured in a soccer game in Brooklyn.] They

were the ones filling in the blanks."

## FARRELL'S LEGEND

Talking about bars, there's a Windsor Terrace legend that still exists today about a night in the 1970s when Pete Hamill took the actress Shirley MacLaine into Farrell's, at a time when Farrell's, like many of the saloons in the neighborhood, didn't serve women at the bar, and she demanded to be served.

The story told over and over again by different customers of Farrell's has different endings that have been passed down through the generations. In some, Shirley MacLaine makes a big scene at the bar and demands to be served. She gets served, and she changes everything.

What actually happened that night?

"That night I was with her in Manhattan," Hamill recalls, "and it was St Patrick's Day. And I ran in to the Gates brothers from the neighborhood. One of them was a fireman. And someone said to her, 'Okay, Shirley, have you ever been to Farrell's? And she goes, 'uh, no.' 'Come on,' and into the cab we go."

"Was it something she was looking forward to?" I ask Hamill. "Had she heard you talking about Farrell's Bar before?"

"Yeah. She went to high school, and she was smart. But she didn't go to college. So she had a kind of curiosity. That brought her to many places that college wouldn't. That brought her to Farrell's Bar. But she wasn't there to say, 'try to talk me out of it.' She didn't do that. It was not confrontational," he says, as he describes how she just went up on her own and ordered a drink.

"They gave it to her. The bartenders were not the old guys. They were younger. She got served, she had one drink and then we headed back to Manhattan."

We talk about some of the other bars of the neighborhood, some that were once in the heart of Windsor Terrace, some on the borders of it. All of them caught forever in the literature of Pete Hamill's books.

"Here you are as a young man on Saturday nights, hanging out in places like Boop's Bar on the corner of 17th Street and 10th Avenue, and the Caton Inn down on Coney Island Avenue near Park Circle. Places you could slow dance to while the juke box played songs by Joni James. What's your memories of those nights?"

"It was a rough bar," he recalls. "There was a bouncer in the Caton Inn named Ray

Continues on page 16

Continued from page 10

Grillo, and the only thing I ever heard him say to anyone was, 'Eh, keep the glasses off the juke box.' And people always said, 'okay.'

"So here you are, you're young," I say to Hamill, "you're down in the Caton Inn on a Saturday night, Sinatra's on the juke box, you're slow dancing in the back room with someone, and at some point your life jumps forward. It's 1974. And you get a call from Frank Sinatra. He says to you, 'Pete, what are you doing?' You tell him you're reading a book. 'Put it down,' he says. 'We're at Jilly's. Come on over.' And of course you do. Tell me about that night. What are you feeling when you get a call like that? Most people from the neighborhood only knew that Sinatra's world existed behind the glass of a juke box that you dropped coins into. And you're invited to hang out with him. How did you deal with that?"

"Before I got to know Sinatra, remember I started in 1960 at the Post, part of what I had been assigned to do at one point was a Broadway beat called 'On the Town.' I'd hang out at Lindy's on 51st Street waiting for something to happen," he remembers. "Sometimes it would be a big murder in Times Square, sometimes it would be a Broadway show that was opening or closing. Whatever it would be. I didn't know how to drive so I hung out with this photographer Artie Pomerantz, and we'd go off.

"So I knew some of these guys. My attitude was I'm not going to fawn over them, but I'm not going to treat them like shit either. I'm not envious of any of these people. By the time I met Sinatra I must have been a reporter for about five or, or six years. I met him in Las Vegas with Shirley."

"What was it like that night in 1974 that he invited you to just drive around New York with him in the back of his limo, not headed anywhere, the two of you just talking? Talking about Babe Ruth, talking, about how the New York Paramount is all gone now, talking about how New York City had changed so much. And he's asking you if you understand women, because he says that he don't. And you tell him that 'every day you know less.'"

"I'm sure if there had been a



Billy Hamill, with three of his seven children: Tommy, left, Kathy and the eldest Pete. It was taken on the roof of 378 7th Avenue, Brooklyn, in 1944. COURTESY: KATHY HAMILL

tape recorder there, the listener would have realized that these are two guys that...[he laughs] they can't figure it out. They're driving around New York — alone."

#### KNOCKOFF ARTISTS

As we sit in Pete Hamill's Downtown loft you can hear the honk of horns mixed in with the urgent wail of sirens drifting up from his city below. And it is his city, at least a great, gritty part of it that he captured so well in his daily newspapers for so many years.

"Your book 'Forever,' is that being turned into a TV series? I keep seeing all these promos on it."

"It's a knockoff," he says. "Totally knocked off. It's by ABC. It's bad enough that it's now the second knockoff. The first one six years ago was called 'New Amsterdam' by the knockoff artists

"I remember when I got the

idea for 'Forever.' I was sitting down at the Battery. It was in October. I was just sitting there alone, thinking, watching people go by, looking at the sun out in the harbor. Trying to imagine my mother's and father's boats in the port as they came to America separately from Ireland.

"And I said to myself, 'I wish I could live forever.' And I laugh to myself, that's not a bad idea for a novel."

"What about your book 'Snow In August?'" I ask him. "Isn't someone interested in making a musical out of it?"

"Yeah, a guy named Peter Melnick has just finished the score. He came up here a few weeks ago and played some of the score for me. Which was really pretty good."

Although very optimistic about the "Snow In August" project, he talks about the uncertainty of things being produced no matter who does

them.

"That's why I decided not to be a screenwriter," Hamill says, "But I had to do it for a while because I needed money so I could take care of my two daughters. And they were more important to me than my alleged taste."

#### WRITER'S BLOCK?

"You quit high school and went to work in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. What did you do there?"

"I was an apprentice sheet metal worker. It was called laborer, but as an apprentice in the Navy Yard every fifth week was spent in a class room and they would teach you how to draw up blue prints, how to read them.

"But the most important thing about it was it would teach me how to work. I was 16 and I had to be there on time. If I wasn't, I couldn't expect to get paid. So learning how to work helped me with the writing for years. You just got to do it.

"I remember that after Bobby Kennedy got killed, I was in, I don't know, a depression, which I didn't recognize, but I couldn't write. And I had been in Mexico with my then wife and kids, trying to cure myself. And I came back to New York and in the second week I was back I had lunch with Paul O'Dwyer at the Second Avenue Deli. So we order and he says, 'What are you doing? What are you writing?' And I said, 'Paul, I think I have a kind of writer's block since Bob died.'

"He looks at me and he says, 'For Christ's sake, you're not important enough to have a writer's block!' And I laughed out loud. And I realized, of course, he's right. [Laughs] And I went back to work."

"In the April 14, 1969, edition of New York Magazine," I remind Hamill, "you wrote something that in many ways was a groundbreaking piece of journalism called 'The Revolt of the White Working-Class.' As a journalist you never seem afraid to break away from the rest of the political pack when you sense a change in the air. No matter what political party it affects. Would you agree with that?"

"I think that's true," he replies, "But the one thing I don't like, and I haven't liked it for a long time since the '60s, is the kind of dogmatic thinking that comes with ideology. Because the more I read, say, Orwell struggling through the Spanish Civil War, and certain other people, the more it was clear that ideology is not thinking, it's a substitute for thinking.

"And, just as I couldn't accept some of the Catholic ideology as a kid, as a 15 year old at Regis, I had that sort of skeptical thing, fleshed out by the Jesuits who insist on having doubt as part of the argument,

and evidence. So I have never been an ideologue. I didn't want to be that way. Some conservatives I admire. I don't know what it would be like if I never read Edmund Burke."

"You teach journalism at NYU. How do you inspire these young people with all the high-tech changes moving through today's newsrooms. What do you say to them after all you took with you from working on hard copy newspapers?"

"What I tell them is, 'The piano didn't write the music, Mozart did.' It doesn't matter what you're writing it on, whether you're writing it on the computer or a Smith Corona Portable Number 3. Passion is what matters."

"You never went to J-school, but you did try to get into Columbia Journalism School, and they turned you down?"

"Yeah, because I hadn't finished high school."

"What did the interviewer you talked to say to you?"

"He said, 'Have you thought of dental school?' [laughs] I wanted to say 'F... no.' I remember walking to the subway from Columbia and thinking about what he said. It bothered me, but it pushed me on instead of discouraging me. Because I come from a neighborhood where when people get knocked down, they get up."

As I get ready to leave, I take some pictures of the rows and rows of books that line the walls. It is not the library of a man who is inspired by electronic libraries, whose entirety you can hold in the palm of your hand.

"Take a picture of Rattigan's," he says.

"Do you ever go back to Windsor Terrace?" I ask. "You were an altar boy in Holy Name Church in the '50s. Did you ever go back to walk through your old schoolyard on Howard Place and Prospect Avenue?"

"Yeah. Last year a reporter from the Daily News had access to our old apartment at 378 7th Avenue. And I went down there and spent a couple of hours with the guy who lives alone there now. And some of the stuff inside was exactly the same. The sink we were using in the kitchen was still there. And I was wondering, how did we get nine people into this place? Christ almighty."

*The 2014 Eugene O'Neill Lifetime Achievement Award Benefit and Cocktail Party, honoring Pete Hamill, will take place on Monday, Oct., 20 from 6:00 to 9:00 p.m. at the Manhattan Club, (upstairs at Rosie O'Grady's) 800 7th Ave. (corner of 52nd St), Times Square, Manhattan. For details, go to: <http://iam-wa.org>.*

The  
Irish Echo's  
online digital  
edition:

www.  
irishecho.com

