

In Memorium

Thomas V. Kelly

Thomas V. Kelly, 86, a Washington journalist so rooted in the nation's capital he was often called "The Mayor of Capitol Hill", died of a heart attack on June 17 at George Washington Hospital.

Kelly, whose career spanned five newspapers including the old Washington Daily News, made a name for himself as a feature writer, an investigative reporter and a media critic, for which he won a number of awards and was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize three times. He also authored two books.

A Gonzaga graduate, he began as a copyboy on The Washington Post in 1939 while still in high school. He joined the Navy in World War II, first as a quartermaster on a three-masted schooner--the only Navy defense north of Boston until 1943—and then on a minesweeper. He was plucked from the fleet in 1944 and sent first to Bloomsburg State Teachers College and then to Penn State where he got his degree in journalism. He first worked as a reporter at the Baton Rouge (La.) State-Times and then the New Orleans Item, where he exposed corruption in the police department so thoroughly that every officer was fired. The top lawman left on the force—a desk sergeant--became the superintendent. The series led to the formation of the New Orleans Crime Commission.

Tom moved to the Washington Daily News in 1954 and soon became its star reporter. In his twelve years there he covered Eisenhower and Kennedy at the White House and the McCarthy hearings at the Senate; walked with ex-President Harry Truman when he came to town; di-

rected and wrote the coverage of the Kennedy assassination and the March on Washington and got the last interview with Sen. Joseph McCarthy and the first one with poet Ezra Pound. He interviewed Malcolm X--before he was Malcolm X--and reported on the malfeasance at DC General Hospital; which led to Congressional hearings and a total change of hospital administration. In some sort of apex of journalistic mischief during the Civil Rights years, he and another reporter merged the local chapter of the segregationist White Citizens Council with CORE--the Congress of Racial Equality--after packing the membership with his neighbors on Capitol Hill.

Tom left the News in 1965 and went to the new War on Poverty, first serving as a regional director of inspections and then as director of national affairs for VISTA. In 1969 he became a free-lancer, writing and editing the magazine, *Canada Today/d'Aujourd'hui*, for many years, as well as pieces for the *New York Times*, *People*, *Nation* and *Nation's Business*. For *Washingtonian* magazine he chronicled as many interesting local murder cases as he could find, new and old, which led to his writing an irregular series on murders for the magazine. These were later collected in the book, *Washington Murders*. He also wrote "I Knew I was Irish Before I Knew Anything" and a number of other stories, including an article on the *Washington Post*. This was the basis of his well-received book, *The Imperial Post*, published by William Morrow in 1983. Some years later he worked as a feature writer on



Tom Kelly. Photo: David Deutsch

the *Washington Times*.

In his writing career, Tom Kelly was known for his clever turns of phrase and his legendary leads. In his *Daily News* story about the small group of Nazis that was scaring half the population, he said, "George Lincoln Rockwell has his room fixed up better than any kid on the block". In a story about a high society couple in the *Washingtonian*, he wrote, "In the candlelight, Tom and Joan Braden almost seem like a success." In a *Washington Times* profile of a Louisiana governor, he said, "Gov. Edwin Edwards is so cold, if you put a pat of butter in his mouth in the morning, it would still be there when he went to bed at night." And in *The Imperial*

Post, he said that Donald Graham was "as discreet as the queen's gynecologist."

Although Tom Kelly was once described in a *Washington Post* profile as a 'woodchip on the sea of life', he was deeply into stability. He not only was a writer all his life but he lived on the block where he was born for all but 11 of his 86 years. Here he saw the Ku Klux Klan and the Bonus Marchers come to his door in the 20's; FDR wave to children as he drove out B Street--or Constitution Ave., as it is now known--in the 30's and watched a generation of marchers go by in the 60's and early 70's.

Tom and Marguerite Kelly were married for 57 years and had four children--three of whom became writers and one who says that she's going to write a book as soon as she has the time. So far the family has published thirteen books, with three more in

the pipeline including one that Tom was about to submit at the time of his death. It is about the life and death of their son, Michael--the first U. S. journalist to be killed in Iraq.

In addition to his wife, Tom is survived by three daughters, Katherine Kelly Bottorff and Meg Kelly Rizzoli, both of Washington, and Nell Conroy, of Darien, Conn., and eight grandchildren, Emily and Marguerite Bottorff of New York; Tom and Jack Kelly of Swampscott, Mass.; Sally and Tommy Rizzoli of Washington and Michael and Jim Conroy of Darien.

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