

McCarthy's High School Years

Wes Morgan

Precious little is known about the life of Cormac McCarthy. His fierce privacy has been described by Williams as “Salingeresque” (E1), and the lack of biographical knowledge is especially evident for the years that predate McCarthy’s entrance into the University of Tennessee in 1951. In what follows I report the serendipitous discovery of some previously unnoticed published material that sheds some light on a very formative period in McCarthy’s life.

Like his two sisters before him, Charles Joseph (Cormac) McCarthy, Jr. attended parochial schools in Knoxville, first St. Mary’s School on Vine Avenue next to the Church of the Immaculate Conception and then the Knoxville Catholic High School, which was held mostly in the old Gregory Ashe House at 1610 Magnolia Avenue—places mentioned in *Suttree* (304, 383).

Early this summer I made a visit to the library of the new Knoxville Catholic High School (the same school, but different campus location from where McCarthy attended school) in search of some pictures of the old house that had served as a high school building during the years that McCarthy attended the school. While I was there the librarian called my attention to a box of some old high school newspapers that had surfaced during a move a few years ago. While the collection of issues was by no means complete, it did contain some material of interest.

The *Gold and Blue* was the name of the school paper, and the paper seems to have played a significant role in the lives of the older McCarthy children. From its pages one learns that McCarthy’s eldest sister, Jackie (Helen Jacquelyn) served as news editor of the school paper during her senior year. In a column titled “Seniors Abnegate Cherished Possessions” the paper states, “Jackie McCarthy leaves her brother (Charles Jr.) and sister (Barbara) to carry on the McCarthy’s tradition at Catholic High” (3).

His next oldest sister, Barbara Ann, became co-editor of the high school newspaper her senior year. Her senior “will” states, “Barbara McCarthy, the girl of the year, wills her genius to Charles, never fear” (“Barbara McCarthy” 2). Both of the elder McCarthy girls were fre-

quently mentioned in the newspaper for taking part in school activities and as being “honors” students. I found no mention of Charlie ever earning “honors” although many issues of the school paper were missing and not available for review. Both sisters were recognized for their academic strengths and for establishing the “McCarthy’s tradition,” and both would go on to attend exclusive northeastern colleges for women.

At the beginning of Charlie’s sophomore year in high school, presumably his sister Barbara, then co-editor of the school newspaper, wrote a short piece introducing him. In it she mentions his home at the foot of Brown’s Mountain, his sportsman’s nature and his long tramps with his dog, Joe. She describes him as a dreamer who, “likes to let his mind wander through fields of dove, across a smooth lake in an early morning quest for pickerel or up to the trout streams of the Smokies.” She also mentions his love of hillbilly songs, his favorite being “Valley of the Shenandoah Eve,” and his hobbies of taxidermy, cartooning, painting, stamp collecting and making parts for his collection of old guns (“Introducing...” 2). The fishing for pickerel probably refers to fishing in Rhode Island during a summer vacation rather than in lakes and streams of Tennessee. The paper also indicated that he participated in a short skit entitled “The Family Rosary” on St. Patrick’s Day (“Feast of St. Patrick” 1).

At the end of his junior year in high school he was chosen as Artist for the staff of the school newspaper. In introducing the staff, the paper said, “Charley [sic] McCarthy, certainly not similar to Edgar Bergan’s [sic] ‘Blockhead,’ in any respect, was the man chosen for the drawing ability and keen sense of humor necessary to make a great cartoonist” (“Meet the Staff” 3).

Perhaps most importantly, during his senior year, Charlie McCarthy published a five-verse poem titled “Autumn’s Magic,” which is the earliest known example of his published writing (McCarthy, “Autumn’s”). It easily predates his first published short story, “Wake for Susan” (McCarthy, “Wake”), which is often mentioned as his first published work. The poem begins

The sun was slowly breaking
Thru the chilly, misty dawn
And the fog upon the river

Lifted, faded, soon was gone. (1-4)

The newspaper also printed some examples of cartoon drawings in his senior year, although I found none that were signed or specifically attributed to him. He sang in the high school choir and was a member of a quintet that sang the Proper by Rossini at a Christmas Eve midnight mass at the Church of the Immaculate Conception. The event was mentioned in the local newspapers (“High School Choir Will Sing Mass” 8; “Immaculate Conception” 2), and a picture of the group rehearsing appeared in the school paper as well (“Quartet, Pianist Practice for Proper” 1).

Comments

In high school McCarthy’s older sisters seem to have set a pretty high standard of performance, something they referred to as the “McCarthy’s tradition.” Rather than following in their footsteps, McCarthy may well have elected to follow a different course, developing a pattern of interests not duplicated elsewhere in his family. “I was not what they had in mind,” he was later quoted as saying in an interview (Woodward 31). “I remember in grammar school the teacher asked if anyone had any hobbies. I was the only one with any hobbies, and I had every hobby there was. There was no hobby I didn’t have, name anything, no matter how esoteric, I had found it and dabbled in it” (Woodward 31). Now one knows more specifically what some of these interests were. Woodward claimed, “Writing and reading were perhaps the only interests the teenage McCarthy, an ardent hobbyist from grammar school on, never considered” (31). While many of his hobbies were noted in the school newspaper, the publication of “Autumn’s Magic” also suggests that at least some skill and interest in writing may have been evident during his high school years. His father had been editor of the *Yale Law Review* (“Mr. McCarthy,” C6) and his two older sisters had held editorial positions on the school paper. The poem may have been the first sign that writing was in his blood even though McCarthy may not have been aware of it until after his return to college from the military service.

“I felt early on I wasn’t going to be a respectable citizen. I hated school from the day I set foot in it,” McCarthy is quoted as saying (Woodward 31). The short biographical introduction in the school

newspaper might be interpreted as an attempt to bring an outsider brother into the mainstream of school life that had served his older sisters so well. Only a few students were so introduced. Despite his expressed dislike for school, the contemporaneous reports of his school activities suggest that he conformed, at least in part, to some familial and school expectations during those years.

McCarthy's attention to naturalistic detail is reflected in his poem, "Autumn's Magic." His hiking experiences on Brown's Mountain as well as his interest in dogs can be seen in *The Orchard Keeper*; his interests in fishing, in *Suttree*; and his interest in old guns in *Blood Meridian*. His "keen sense of humor" is found throughout his novels.

This glimpse of McCarthy's teenage years may also help the reader round out the character, Cornelius Suttree. While the reader of *Suttree* is only given brief glimpses of the character's life before his time on the river, those glimpses are of events related to his time at school (304) and church (253-55). Did McCarthy carve and color a wooden figure and hide it in the chimney of the old school? He did sit in classrooms in that same old house. Did McCarthy serve mass at church with Jimmy Long and set Danny Yike's hair on fire? He did attend and celebrate holiday masses in the same church. One can easily imagine that Suttree's interests and family of origin were similar to McCarthy's as well.

Works Cited

- "Barbara McCarthy." *Gold and Blue* 25 May 1949: 2.
"Feast of St. Patrick." *Gold and Blue* 31 Mar. 1949: 1.
"High School Choir Will Sing Mass." *Knoxville Journal* 23 Dec. 1950: 8.
"Immaculate Conception." *Knoxville News-Sentinel* 23 Dec. 1959: 2.
"Introducing...." *Gold and Blue* Nov. 1948: 2.
McCarthy, Jr., C. J. "Wake for Susan." *The Phoenix* Knoxville: U of Tennessee (1959, Oct.): 3-6.
McCarthy, Charlie. "Autumn's Magic." *Gold and Blue* 22 Nov. 1950: 2.
McCarthy, Cormac. *Suttree*. New York: Random House, 1979.

- “Meet the Staff.” *Gold and Blue* 28 Apr. 1950: 3.
- “Mr. McCarthy, father of local author, dies.” *Knoxville News-Sentinel* 16 Feb. 1995: C6.
- “Quartet, Pianist Practice for Proper.” Photograph. *Gold and Blue* 19 Dec. 1950: 1.
- “Seniors Abnegate Cherished Possessions.” *Gold and Blue* May 1948: 3.
- Williams, Don. “Cormac McCarthy.” *Knoxville News-Sentinel* 10 Jun. 1990: E1-2.
- Woodward, Richard. “Cormac McCarthy’s venomous fiction.” *New York Times Magazine* 19 Apr. 1992: 28+.