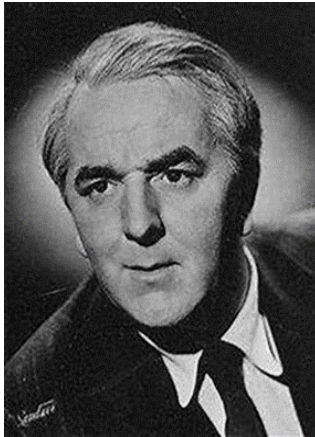


# A wee bit of maritime history... 28

FREE



'Joseph Tomelty - 'one of the most important cultural and artistic figures in Northern Ireland since the Second World War.'



Joseph Tomelty, author, actor and playwright, was born in 1911 and grew up along the shore in Portaferry. At the age of 4 he went to the local school, St. Patricks, which had been opened as a National School in 1853. Portaferry was his homeland and the place he used as a template for how humans should behave. Much of his work includes aspects of the maritime heritage which he learned in his early years.

Having done well in school, Joe left at the age of 12. He said goodbye to his mother, Mary, nee Drumgoole, and moved to Belfast where he was apprenticed in his father James Tomelty's trade of painting.

He attended classes at the city's technical college, where an English teacher, a Mr Tipping, encouraged him to write. Employed in the Harland & Wolff shipyards, he lived in lodgings on the Lower Falls Road and began to act in 1937 with an amateur company, the St Peter's Players. All the while he was busy writing.

St Peter's Players produced the first of his thirteen plays, '*Barnum Was Right*' (1938), which was also broadcast on BBC radio in December that year. With others in his company, he helped found the Northern Ireland Players in the winter of 1938-9.

In 1940 St Peter's Players joined the Jewish Institute Dramatic Society - under the direction of Harold Goldblatt - and the Ulster Theatre to form the Group Theatre, resident in the Ulster Minor Hall in Belfast's Bedford Street. Tomelty was an actor and the general manager of the company from 1941 to 1952; he was also booking clerk, usher, doorman, and cleaner.

He wrote 'All souls' night' (1948) which is a haunting tragedy first performed by the Group Theatre in September 1948. Tomelty, played the lead role of John Quinn, the fisherman who loses two sons to the sea, something he was familiar with growing up in Portaferry.

His childhood impacted again in *Red is the Port Light* (1948). It was his first novel and is the psychological drama of another sailor, Stephen Durnan, who survives a shipwreck only to marry the widow of the foundered vessel's captain. It is a dark tale that ends in murder. It also features Portaferry.

It is entirely opposite to the radio serial 'The McCooeys' (1948-54), which he wrote and acted in for the BBC Northern Ireland Home Service. Requiring a script of 6,000 words every week, 'The McCooeys' played to huge audiences weekly for six years and is the reason why he became a household name in the north.

The playwright Sam Hanna Bell remembered walking through the Co. Antrim village of Waterfoot on a summer evening and following that week's story from house to house through open windows.

Tomelty played the central role of Bobby Greer, the grocer who tells the family's story.

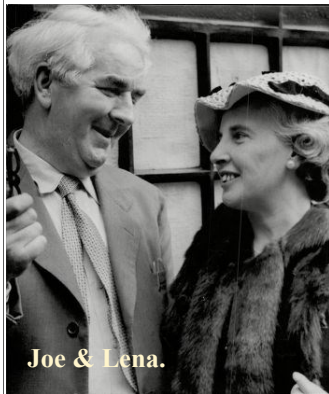
In 1942 Tomelty married Lena, daughter of the talented and well-known actress Min Milligan. They had two daughters, both of whom worked in the theatre profession; Roma, sadly now deceased, and Frances, a successful actress.



At the same time as pursuing a successful acting career in British and Hollywood films like *Bhowani Junction* and *Moby Dick*, writing plays as diverse as *All Souls' Night* (1948) and *Is the Priest at Home?* (1954), he was providing the wordy scripts for each weekly episode of *The McCooeys* - a total in the region of 800,000 words over seven years.

It is hard to overestimate the impact of that series. In his hands, an intended middle-class drama became a narrative of working-class life which invented "Belfast" as a popularly conceived city, and so influenced a generation.

Tomelty's film career prospered. He played Dr Brannigan in *The Gentle Gunman* (1954) with Dirk Bogarde and John Mills, and Dooley in *Happy Ever After* (1954) with David Niven. Disaster struck when he took screen tests in 1954 to star with Ava Gardner in *Bhowani Junction*. He suffered near-fatal injuries in a car crash that left him unconscious for weeks and unable to write. He did continue to act and appeared in 17 more films including playing the role of Dr McLaughlin in the 1958 film '*A Night to Remember*.'



Joe & Lena.

Joseph Tomelty was awarded an MA for services to theatre by Queen's University, Belfast, in 1956, the first actor to be so honoured; in the 1980s, his novels were reprinted by Blackstaff Press in Belfast; in 1991, the Arts Council of Northern Ireland commissioned a bronze bust to celebrate his 80th birthday; in 1993, an edition of his plays introduced his work to a new generation; and his plays continue to be produced in both amateur and professional theatre.

Joseph Tomelty died on 7<sup>th</sup> June 1995. Contemporaries remembered him as a good-humoured, generous man whose career was prematurely ended, but the body of work he produced was outstanding: 12 stageplays, 2 Novels 3 Radio plays , including the *McCooley's* which ran for six years. He also appeared in 33 films.

'At his funeral, which began in the splendour of St Peter's Cathedral, in Belfast, and ended on a windy hill in Portaferry, the people of the city turned out to mark his passing. A piper playing "The Singing Bird" to accompany the burial in his home townland of Ballyphilip marked the end of an era in northern Irish letters.'

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