

The Last Great GUNWRITER

The life and legacy of Michael McIntosh. by Vic Venters

Author's Prologue: I completed this article and submitted it to *Sporting Classics* in mid-July, after visiting Michael and Connie at their home in Iowa. A few short weeks later Michael was gone. Penning these words, I struggle to convey the grief I feel over the loss of the man who was my inspiration as a writer, mentor, colleague and dear friend.

This profile was conceived back in the spring during a phone conversation Michael and I had in which he reflected on a writing career that stretched back to the 1970s. Wouldn't a retrospective of his influential career be appropriate – especially one that focused on his enormous role in resurrecting America's interest in double guns and wingshooting? *Sporting Classics* has been Michael's home as a feature writer and columnist for 28 years, almost all his professional career, and it was clearly the magazine to publish it.

This article stands as it was originally written – not as a eulogy but as a tribute to its still-living subject. From the get-go I tried hard to avoid hagiography – Michael would have it no other way – so its tone is perhaps less sentimental and more clinically journalistic than it would have been had I written it after his death. Nor does it pretend to be a complete biography; for all his celebrity and friendliness with his fans, Michael was in his soul a deeply private man. Those of us who loved him respected those boundaries.

Michael's brilliance with the English language – “words” as he called them – ushered in the renaissance in fine guns. He could capture their appeal like no one else, and speak to our hopes and aspirations and to fine days afield with good friends and great dogs. His passing, in a sense, marks the end of that era.

But in his books and articles he remains to enlighten and inspire us, and in them the star that was his shimmers on. Godspeed, Michael, and God bless you.

After roaming the globe for the last quarter century, Michael McIntosh has come home. His talents have taken him to 49 of 50 states, Mexico and Canada, 11 nations in Europe and five in South America. He's lived on both coasts and in three states in the middle and has spent much of his life doing what most sportsmen can only dream of: hunting the world and shooting fine guns – and making a living doing both. He's been described as America's “premier sporting writer” and with 29 books under his belt and hundreds of articles in America's best outdoor magazines, it is an accolade he undoubtedly has earned.

He now spends most of his days surrounded by cornfields in a white, one-story farmhouse down a long gravel road not too far outside Pella, Iowa, only 40 miles from Ottumwa, the town of his birth. He shares it with three girls: Connie, his blue-eyed wife; Katie, a rambunctious golden retriever; and Hooch, a pit bull so cuddly that you can scarcely believe her breed. Besides the crunch of tires on gravel from an occasional passing car, only the chirping of songbirds at the feeder and the wind rustling through stalks of corn stir the silence around his home.

“I've never wanted all the money in the world,” says McIntosh, seated in a well-stuffed leather chair in his living room. “Just enough to live modestly and be comfortable.”

McIntosh's home is plenty comfortable but unfortunately he is no longer comfortable in it. The rails that have carried him though life for six and a half decades have not been kind to his carriage. Ailments beset him: he suffered a heart attack a decade ago, his knees are worn out and his back is blown. His suffering is distressingly visible – and often audible. He groans when bone grates on bone in his lower spine, squeezing the nerves to his legs, and when the pain rises late in the day his voice will sometimes sink to a



Proud of his Scottish lineage, McIntosh simply had to pause and pose by this storefront while on a grouse shoot near Edinburgh. Opposite: Mac on a 1998 grouse hunt in Minnesota.

whisper. “Don’t let this happen to you,” he says.

Even so, McIntosh still speaks just as beautifully he writes: eloquently and elegantly in carefully crafted sentences, and with flashes of dry wit and humor – the same distinct voice that has made him the finest prose stylist to ever put pen to paper on the topics of fine guns and wingshooting.

“My brain,” he says, “is about the only part of me that isn’t broken.”

Three decades into a fine-gun revival, it’s sometimes easy to forget that McIntosh has been not only America’s most articulate spokesman for this revival, but that his words actually helped trigger it.

“Michael’s writing so closely parallels the resurgence of fine guns and wingshooting that there’s little doubt he created the rebirth as much as he documented and fueled it,” says Stephen Lamboy, founder of Ithaca Classic Doubles and author of several books on modern Italian gun engraving. “The enthusiasm his writing generated among wingshooters back in the ’80s and ’90s helped inspire me to revive the New Ithaca Double.”

Tony Galazan, America’s best-known maker of new double guns, echoes these sentiments. “Michael has been a major contributor to the current resurgence of interest in fine guns,” says Galazan, the owner of Connecticut Shotgun Manufacturing Company. “His influence in the fine-gun community will be felt for many years, and he’s been a huge influence to the way I think about gunning.”

That influence has even rippled across the Atlantic. “At a time when others were forecasting the demise of fine guns, Michael championed the cause of the classic double, including those made by craftsmen in Britain,” says Daryl Greatrex, managing director of London’s Holland & Holland Ltd. “He has without a doubt been a major influence in the renaissance of the traditional British side-by-side game gun.”

Courtly in manners and soft-spoken, McIntosh remains humble about his legacy: “Starting the boom in fine guns wasn’t something I intentionally set out to do,” he says. “The interest was there but I didn’t know it. I just wanted to communicate.”

When he began writing about guns back in the late ’70s, America’s great doubles – the Parkers, L.C. Smiths, Foxes, Ithacas and Lefevers – were no longer made. Winchester’s Model 21 alone survived, albeit only by custom-order. There were no magazines devoted to doubles as there are today, and during the preceding decades new books on the subject had grown scarce, a drought broken only occasionally by a sprinkling of tediously written technical tomes.

Back then McIntosh was a staff writer and editor with the Missouri Department of Conservation. In Missouri Conservationist, the department’s magazine, he published a series of historical articles on America’s classic double-gun makers. They struck a chord with readers – enough so that McIntosh revised and expanded each and serialized them into *The Best Shotguns Ever Made in America*, released in 1981 by Scribners, a heavyweight among New York’s mainstream publishers.

The 185-page work garnered what was probably an unprecedented write-up in *The Washington Post*; its reviewer describing it as a “thoroughly engaging trip through the golden age of the American shotgun.”

The reviewer also noted McIntosh’s core observation: “What killed the classic American double is the very thing that, ironically, ensures its survival; when quality becomes too expensive to achieve, it also becomes too precious to be without.”

These were sentiments that would resonate with readers in ways that would dramatically boost the popularity of vintage double guns and also, ultimately, contemporary craft gunmaking. “That little book probably had more to do with influencing a generation of American wingshooters and gun collectors than anything ever written in the sporting press to date,” says Bryan Bilinski, the owner of FieldSport and



Mike and William H. (Pop) Headrick pass-shot these feral pigeons near Cape Girardeau, Missouri, circa 1990. Right: Mike watches a flight of doves while on a '91 hunt in Mexico's Sierra Madres.

co-founder of Countrysport Press. “Michael kindled a fire in baby-boomer wingshooters who longed for a connection to a kinder, gentler era. Double guns, and the way he wrote about them, became the connection to a lost part of America so many of us yearned for.”

Born in 1945 in southeastern Iowa, McIntosh’s love of guns and the outdoors was instilled early on. “From the time I could walk,” he recalls, “I was hunting squirrels and rabbits with my father and my uncle.”

Words – and using them – were his other love. “I wanted to write even before I could read,” he says. “My parents and grandparents read to me, and I cannot remember a time when I wasn’t completely captivated by words.”

He majored in English in college and then pursued his master’s degree at the University of Iowa, where he stayed to complete the course-work for a Ph.D. Seven years spent teaching literature at a small college in Missouri eventually exhausted his patience with the politics endemic to academia, so he left to take a job at Missouri’s wildlife department in 1978.

By then, he was free-lancing on the weekends and at night. He recalls one of the first hunting articles he sold. “I sent *Yankee* magazine a three-and-a-half-page article and they sent me \$350. I thought, ‘a hundred dollars a page . . . I can do this.’”

With *The Best Shotguns Ever Made in America* a success and magazines hungry for his articles, he launched a full-time career as a free-lancer in the mid-1980s. Not long after, fledgling publisher Countrysport Press approached him for an expanded version of his earlier work, this to be titled, simply, *Best Guns*. It would revisit the classic American doubles, but also cover guns and gunmaking in the UK and in Europe. It has become McIntosh’s best seller, and has since gone through several printings and a revised edition.

Dr. Bill Palmer, an avid wingshooter

and head of the quail program at Tall Timbers Research Station, recalls his reaction to it: “Reading *Best Guns* was like reading the *Bible* for the first time.” A lot of readers – myself included – felt the same way.

McIntosh’s entire bibliography is too extensive for cataloging here, but a couple of gun books that are favorites of mine are the landmark *A.H. Fox: The Finest Gun in the World* (1992) – a model for what a gunmaker’s history should be – and *Shotgun Technicana* (2002), the latter written in collaboration with Purdey-trained gunmaker David Trevallion. These are works that will stand the test of time, not only as factual references but as examples of technical writing that is lucidly informative and fun to read.

Though best known as a gun writer, McIntosh’s work spans topics as diverse as natural history and wildlife art, even fiction – in the latter category his latest book, a novel published in 2009 titled *The Dogmen*.

His favorite writing? “*Wild Things*,” he says without hesitation. Published by Countrysport in ’97, it’s a collection of sparkling essays on natural history serialized from *Wildlife Art* magazine.

By the mid-1990s McIntosh had become a bonafide celebrity in the burgeoning world of wingshooting, fêted by editors and outfitters everywhere, and mobbed by fans at sporting shows. Never once have I seen him fail to be kind or gracious to his many admirers, and he’s always taken the time to chat or sign autographs.

One year at the Vintage Cup I watched a pair of his more ardent fans staring gape-jawed at the pipe he’d placed on a table. “O-h-h-h my God,” one of them said, pointing a finger at it like a medieval pilgrim might have done with a relic from the True Cross. “That, that is Michael McIntosh’s pipe!”

In sporting literature of recent

times, only the late Gene Hill has rivaled McIntosh’s ability to touch his readers so. This is, of course, easier done when writing about dogs or other warm and fuzzies; it’s an altogether different task to touch souls with tales of cold steel and dead craftsmen.

“I can only say what I have been told, and I am told what distinguished me from others was passion,” he explains. “Because I was passionate. I’m still passionate.”

Even now, fettered with pain, McIntosh remains in love with guns – double guns particularly, those with barrels side-by-side especially.

“I don’t know of any other human invention, except for perhaps a good watch, that combines beauty and practicality to that extent,” he says. “You can admire a gun and then take it out and feed yourself with it, and you can’t feed yourself with a watch.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “At least you know when it’s time to eat . . .”

I’ve long marveled at the penetrating clarity with which McIntosh can defog even the most complex subject, making something intrinsically arcane not only interesting but also accessible. Does this come from being mechanically minded? “No, I’ve had to work at that,” he says. “I’m not really mechanical myself but I figured if somebody could make it, someone else can understand it.”

A near-photographic memory has aided not only his understanding of guns but also his expository powers. “Michael can look at a mechanism, or a photo of a gun part, just once and remember it forever and how it works,” says David Trevallion. “He’s very quick to understand something. And he always worked very hard with gunmakers or other experts to get things right.”

Gunwriters, however, have figured only faintly in the development of his inimitable style. “I’ve read virtually all the gunwriters – American, British, even a couple of Italians – and have

gleaned knowledge from them all. None were any great influence on me as a writer.”

In his early days McIntosh instead looked to the giants of 20th century literature that he’d studied and had lectured on in his classes. “We all start by imitating someone,” he says. “I started by trying to emulate Steinbeck and Faulkner. Eventually I drifted off into my own style, my own way of doing things.”

More direct influences have been two masters of modern non-fiction: John McPhee and the late John Madson. “These two influenced me the most, and for pretty much the same reason. They didn’t write about guns, but they treat their subjects with such clarity and insight that subject-matter doesn’t matter.”

Madson, a close friend, was especially influential. “I learned to write about natural history by reading Madson,” he says. “There was nobody – nobody – who could write like him.”

McIntosh does his writing at the dining-room table in his living room, but he first tackles the task on his feet in the kitchen. He’ll smoke his pipe and gaze out at the cornfields rising onto gentle slopes in front of his house. Mental composition – cogitation would not inaccurately describe the process – can take him hours, or days – “even weeks,” says Connie.

“Some writers have to see the words before they write,” McIntosh explains. “I hear it – I have to hear it first.” With the piece virtually written in his head, he’ll then type it out, sometimes in a single go, other times in sections over several days. Once his words are on paper, however, he makes virtually no revisions. Astonishingly, he doesn’t need to.

As an editor who’s worked with him for the better part of 15 years, I can only state that what a reader sees in print is what Michael sends virtually verbatim to his publishers. Everyone needs an editor, it has often been said, but not Michael

McIntosh – his style simply cannot be bettered, at least by pedestrian hands such as mine.

Next to his chair by the window, a guitar rests in its rack. All his life McIntosh has adored music, and for most of it he’s played it. His sentences have an unmistakable lilt to them, and they draw a reader in like a catchy tune might a child.

“I think of every sentence in terms of its cadence,” he says. “I’m nobody’s excuse for a poet but I do hear it, the rhythm of writing, and I always have.”

As effortless as his prose is to read, his efforts to make it so stand stark in contrast. “I work so hard on what I think of as the seams, the transitions – this to that to that to that,” he says. “There is a hell of a lot of energy that goes into my writing, and I put as much as I have into every sentence, and into every word.

“People who think of writing as being effortless,” he adds, “are people who don’t write.”

Passion, knowledge, and dedication to the hard slog that is the word trade – Michael McIntosh brings all these to his craft. These are not the qualities, however, which distinguish his work from that of every other gun writer, past or present, nor are they alone what launched a renaissance in wingshooting decades ago.

That’s sprung instead from Michael’s art – the power of his prose to tap a vein that runs deep into every reader’s heart. It requires a singular talent to mine a stranger’s soul – and part of that comes from a certain courage it takes to look deep into one’s own, and then write honestly from it. Michael will tell you he is no perfect man, but he has always looked to the best in himself – and inspired what is best in us.

Vic Venters is the author of *Gun Craft: Fine Guns & Gunmakers* in the 21st Century and co-author of *Best of British: A Celebration of British Gunmaking*.