

'A Garden of Martyrs' depicts 1806 hangings

By EDWARD ORZECOWSKI

WILBRAHAM - Holyoke's annual St. Patrick's Parade celebrates this region's strong influence of Irish heritage.

But being Irish in Western Massachusetts wasn't always a cause for celebration. In fact, at one time it was a curse - and being both Irish and Catholic was a double curse.

Next month, Wilbraham writer Michael C. White's "A Garden of Martyrs," a fictionalized history of two men tried for murder and executed in Northampton two centuries ago - largely because they were Irish and Catholic - will be reissued in paperback by St. Martin's Press.

A simple monument on the edge of Northampton, a community now known for its tolerance, bears testament to that execution. Erected in memory of Dominic Daley and James Halligan, the stark lozenge of granite stands on a small hill adjacent to the decaying hulk of Northampton State Hospital. Distanced from the city's famous offering of restaurants, boutiques and nightspots, the monument is now bordered by No Trespassing signs.

According to Kerry W. Buckley of Historic Northampton, the pair was hanged not far from here in an area formerly known as Pancake Plain, current site of the Smith College athletic fields. In 1806 an astonishing crowd estimated at 15,000 - nearly six times the population of Northampton at the time - gathered at the foot of the gallows to witness the executions of Daley and Halligan.

White was first drawn to this story by the fact that the 1805 murder had occurred in Wilbraham, his own town, near the Chicopee River, and by the fervor of the anti-Irish, anti-Catholic prejudice of the era.

"The Garden of Martyrs" deals with the Irish," White said, "but it captures the earliest form of prejudice, aside from African American slaves or Native Americans - about people coming into this country, supposedly freely, and facing great prejudice. The Irish were the first, then the Italians, then the Polish and Jews, and Hispanics nowadays."

Daley and Halligan, charged with the murder of a young man named Marcus Lyon, were imprisoned for five months, but were allowed only two days with a defense lawyer to pre-



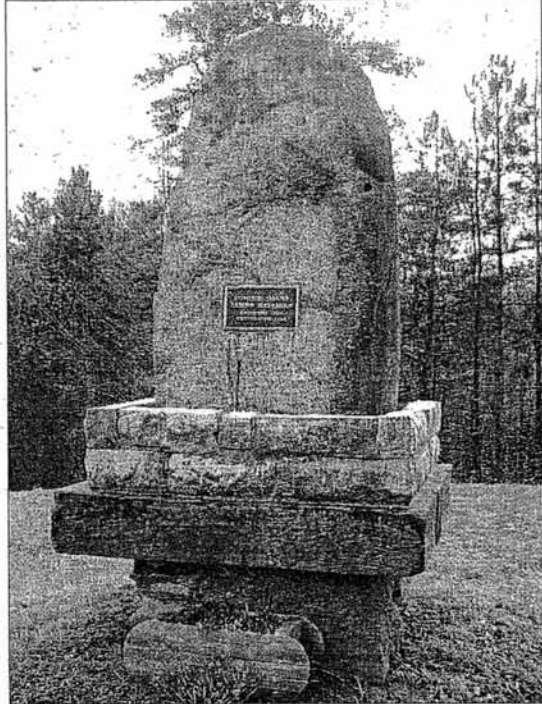
Staff photo by MARK M. MURRAY

Author Michael C. White sits with a stack of his books at his home in Wilbraham.

pare for what turned out to be a pro forma trial at the Old Meeting House on Main Street in Northampton. They were convicted on the flimsiest of evidence and testimony, largely because of their Irish Catholic heritage.

Not until nearly two centuries later would they be pardoned in 1984 by Gov. Michael Dukakis, whose proclamation recognized "that religious prejudice and ethnic intolerance played a significant role in their arrests and trial ... a miscarriage of justice." A bronze plaque on the monument now proclaims the innocence of Daley and Halligan.

Coincidental with the paperback release of "The Garden of Martyrs," White will be participating in diversity and tolerance activities in the town of Monson's "No Place for Hate" campaign. In conjunction with the Anti-Defamation League, Monson's Community Relations



A simple granite monument to Dominic Daley and James Halligan stands off West Street in Northampton, near the former Northampton State Hospital. Michael C. White has written "A Garden of Martyrs," a fictionalized history of the two men who were tried for murder and executed in Northampton two centuries ago.

Committee selected his book for townwide reading and discussions, including a May 4 appearance by White at the Monson Free Library.

"On the one hand," said White, "America is this wonderful land of opportunity, freedom and justice, where everybody's equal before the law. But it

doesn't take a great deal of insight to see that Americans, time and time again, are led by their own biases.

"Those biases may be racial, they may be cultural, they may be ethnic, they may be gender-related against women or somebody's sexual preferences. I would see that again and again,

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Michael C. White

from the young gay boy who was murdered out in Wyoming to the African American who was dragged to his death, to the Jewish experience that we've had - on, and on, and on. We have, on the one hand, this great mecca of freedom, yet it's not completely free."

White, who is also a writing instructor at Fairfield University in Connecticut and the University of Southern Maine's Stone-coast program, is now working on a contemporary novel.

"It's about a young woman who was in a terrible accident which killed her sister," White said. "She's 17. She was hurt badly, disfigured because of burns. The novel starts 15 years later, as she's trying to put her life back together, when something happens."

White also has plans for another historical novel to be set in New England, probably during the 1850s.

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