William McLoughlin, Brown historian, activist

By THOMAS J. MORGAN
Journal-Bulletin Staff Writer

William G. McLoughlin, 70, a prize-winning historian at Brown University, chronicler of Rhode Island's own past and champion of civil libertarian causes, died Monday at Rhode Island Hospital after an illness of 10 days. He was the husband of Virginia (Duffy) McLoughlin.

The affable professor, an informal man who preferred grass roots to ivory towers, was always ready to address student concerns and speak out in public as political passions washed to and fro from the Vietnam years through the U.S. covert military involvement in El Salvador and Nicaragua.


McLOUGHLIN

Professor McLoughlin's causes were many — free speech was a favorite, and he was a member of the free speech committee of the American Civil Liberties Union. For years during the 1980s he could be found on Friday evenings standing patiently with other protesters on the steps of the federal courthouse on Kennedy Plaza, holding up signs urging motorists to honk their horns if they opposed U.S. intervention in Central America. He opposed Brown's practice of allowing recruiters from the CIA on campus.

He also defended trees against municipal workers and developers who were too quick to cut down mature specimens. In the professor's view, shade trees were natural air-conditioners.

"The urban developers are on a roll," he warned in 1984 while criticizing the city's action in cutting down 50 mature trees on Kennedy Plaza as part of a park redesign project. His influence, as chairman of the Brown-based Save the Trees Committee, caused the city to develop policies on street trees and to encourage tree plantings.

A man of ready humor, he once donned pointed Vulcan ears to address a student audience, and confessed to being a "Trekkie," a devotee of the television series *Star Trek*.

In 1982, Professor McLoughlin joined several others in challenging, on constitutional grounds, Providence's decision to permit the displaying of a crèche on the steps of City Hall. U.S. District Judge Raymond J. Pettine did not rule on the constitutionality question but rejected the suit on the ground that Mr. McLoughlin and the others lacked legal standing.

Professor McLoughlin began teaching at Brown in 1954. He wrote studies of Henry Ward Beecher, Billy Sunday and Billy Graham. His two-volume work entitled *New England Dissent: The Baptists and the Separation of Church and State* received the Frederic G. Melcher Book Award and was nominated for the National Book Award.

Locally, his best-known work is *Rhode Island: A Bicentennial History*, a history of the state published in 1978. The book deals with social and economic as well as political forces. Professor McLoughlin believed that Rhode Islanders, citizens of a state founded by a breakaway rebel and based on the freedom to dissent, are "perhaps the most American of Americans." He himself was a lot like Rhode Island. His naturally rebellious nature felt right at home here.

His latest book was *Soul Liberty: The Baptists' Struggle in New England, 1630-1833*. His fifth book, on the Cherokee Indians, *After the Trail of Tears: The Cherokees, 1839-1880*, will be published next year.

Born in Maplewood, N.J., a son of the late William G. and Florence (Quinn) McLoughlin, he had been a Providence resident since 1954.

He was a second lieutenant in the Army Field Artillery during World War II. He was a 1947 graduate of Princeton University and received a doctorate in American civilization from Harvard in 1953. In 1953-54 he was a Fulbright Fellow at the University of London, and also received fellowships from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment of the Humanities.

Besides his wife, he leaves three daughters, Gail McLoughlin-Elliott of Greenville and Martha McLoughlin and Helen McLoughlin-Duffy, both of Providence, and two brothers, Quin McLoughlin of Palatine, Ill., and Frank J. McLoughlin of Hockessin, Del.

A memorial service will be held Tuesday at 2 p.m. at Sayles Hall, Brown University.

McLOUGHLIN, William

McLOUGHLIN, Professor William G.

December 28, 1992. Husband of Virginia (Duffy) McLoughlin. Residence Bowen St. Relatives and friends are invited to attend a Memorial Service in Sayles Hall, Brown University on Tuesday at 2 p.m. In place of flowers a contribution may be sent to the RI Affiliate of ACLU, 212 Union St., Room 211, Providence, RI 02903. Arrangements by Drabble Sherman.

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