

A Short Biography of Thomas B. Keehn  
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Tom Keehn was born on December 1<sup>st</sup>, 1915 in Burlington, Iowa, the second of three sons of Haden and Lily Babcock Keehn. A town of “30,000 friendly people” on the banks of the Mississippi River, Burlington provided the foundations in family, faith, education and community service upon which Tom built his life and various careers. Young Tom was an excellent student, scoring straight ‘As’ through high school —thanks at least in part to his habit of reading the dictionary for pleasure. He was also a successful athlete, most notably as catcher on a local semi-professional baseball team. His brothers Bob and Jack were also active socially, academically, and athletically in Burlington, and the Keehn family was known throughout town where Haden held several jobs, including Rand Lumber Company where he was, for a time, bookkeeper.

The Keehns were active members of the First Congregational Church in Burlington, where Tom was ordained in 1944. While Tom was a student at Grinnell College in central Iowa he was a part-time itinerant minister and youth organizer in churches throughout the state and beyond. Graduating from Grinnell Phi Beta Kappa in 1938, Tom received a scholarship to study economics at Columbia University. (He was also a candidate for a Rhodes scholarship, but the interview panel’s lack of a sense humor kept Tom from Cambridge; when the President of the University of Iowa asked, “Should I invest more in sports programs at the University, as alumni are pressuring me to do?” Tom responded that it was a technical question that he couldn’t answer without a fee.)

While studying economics at Columbia in the late ‘30s and early ‘40s, Tom was pulled across the street to Union Theological Seminary, where the lectures of Reinhold Niebuhr, in particular, inspired him to broaden his academic pursuits. In 1944, Tom received both an M.A. in Economics from Columbia and a Master of Theology in Social Ethics from Union. As part of his religious study, Tom visited churches in and around New York, and during a visit to the Church-in-the-Gardens in Forest Hills, Queens, Tom became acquainted with the McKee family. He became especially interested in middle McKee sisters Bea and Martha, inspiring patriarch Harper McKee to inquire of him at one Sunday meal at Tennis Place, “Young man, just which one of my daughters are you courting?”

Tom and Martha were married on June 24<sup>th</sup>, 1945, at the Church-in-the-Gardens in Forest Hills. A year later their first child Deborah was born, followed two years later by Jonathan, then David, Benjamin, Adam, and, finally, Joel, the youngest, born in 1960 and, like his three immediate elder brothers, in New Delhi, India. Shortly after his own wedding, Tom performed the wedding of Martha’s sister Bea to Mike Watson, and over the years he performed more than 40 wedding services for friends and family, including those of all his children and, notably, of Timothy Geithner, current Treasury Secretary and oldest son of his longtime friends Peter and Deborah.

Tom’s first job was as a legislative representative (he did not like the term ‘lobbyist’) in Washington, D.C., for the United Church of Christ’s Council for Social Action. During his time in Washington, Tom met Nelson Rockefeller, who determined in 1952 that the young Iowan with the impressive background should be the Rockefeller representative in India for the non-profit

American Association for Economic and Social Development. The initial one-year assignment in India turned into eight years living there, and established Tom's life-long connection to the people, issues and art of India. It was there that he befriended Gloria Steinem, with whom he remained close all his life. Tom instigated one of the first shows of contemporary Indian artists, many of whom became lifelong friends, including M. F. Husain, Ram Kumar, Gaitonde and Krishan Khanna. Husain, in fact, began a portrait of Tom in May this year. Tom returned to India often, and his small collection of important post-independence paintings remained a source of great pride and further work.

Following the India years, Tom took up two short assignments with the U.S. Agency for International Development in Zambia and Zimbabwe (then still known by their colonial names), but he found government work limiting, and so he and the family returned to the United States in 1964. In New York he worked with Welthy Fisher, the founder of an organization called World Education, whom he had met in India. Tom eventually became president of World Ed, and oversaw its growth into a leading organization for literacy and education, especially for women and girls. In the 1980s and '90s, Tom helped found and was Director of Development Education at InterAction, a coalition of more than 150 U.S. non-profit organizations involved in international development. He also consulted for a number of agencies, including World Learning and the American Forum for Global Education. Recently, Tom served as a senior advisor for the Hill Lantern, the family newsletter that was revived for the McKee family reunion in Mystic, Connecticut.

Tom was a long-time member of the Riverside Church in New York, the Asia Society, and the Museum of Modern Art, among many other organizations. He served until his death as a member of the board of directors of World Education. In 2000, Tom published a book entitled *India Ink*, which combines letters written by Martha during their time in India with photographs of their collection of Indian art. Tom was the recipient of numerous awards, including and most recently the World Education Award in recognition of outstanding service and support which was presented to him by Gloria Steinem. At Tom's 67<sup>th</sup> class reunion, he was presented with a Grinnell College Distinguished Service Award. Tom lived at the family homestead in Forest Hills, and kept busy in a variety of ways— including frequent visits with family and an ever-expanding circle of friends—until the very end.