

EDWIN O'CONNOR

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Edwin O'Connor (1918-1968) wrote three widely-read novels, but he is all but identified as the author of one of them. The three novels are *The Last Hurrah* (1956), *The Edge of Sadness* (1961) and *All in the Family* (1966). These were bracketed by an early novel, *The Oracle* (1951) and by the lesser later efforts *Benjy* (1957) and *I Was Dancing* (1964).

O'Connor was born in Providence but was raised in Woonsocket, Rhode Island. His decision to go to Notre Dame was crucial for him as a writer. There he came under the charismatic influence of Frank O'Malley, to whom he would dedicate *The Edge of Sadness*. The English Department of those days was a remarkable place, particularly for a young man harboring hopes of becoming a writer. John T. Frederick and Father Leo L. Ward were there, as well as the short story writer and novelist Richard Sullivan. O'Malley was not himself a writer, but he saw imaginative literature in a way that went far beyond the vision even of his colleagues. Fiction was not merely a diversion, an opportunity for the writer to impose his ego on the writer. Rather it was seen in terms of a philosophy of Catholic culture.

It may well be that Frank O'Malley became known beyond the

Notre Dame campus largely because of his influence on Edwin O'Connor. I have vivid memories of the tall shy O'Connor moving rapidly down corridors and across the campus walks when he returned for his annual visit with his old mentor. Shyness called to shyness, as the psalmist did not say, and Frank was justifiably proud of his old student, now a famous if self-effacing author.

Notre Dame in the late 1930's was both more Catholic and more Irish than it is today and it may well be that O'Connor first became aware of himself as an Irish Catholic during his four years in South Bend. It was only when he wrote out of that lived awareness that he wrote well. The temptation to do otherwise, to assume some transcendent American persona, is one every writer feels and ought to resist..

American literature has sprung up in the most unlikely places, Mississippi river towns, the middle border of Hamlin Garland, Oak Park, St Paul, the Tidewater Basin; it has come out of Nebraska and Indiana and out of the South. It is an amazing and various thing, yet in the hands of critics and professors there grew up the notion that it had everything to do with New England and Protestantism. It is odd to see the way William Dean Howells had to be credentialed in Boston and then New York, as if he were something other than the person he shows us in *Boy's_Town*. Even Mark Twain lived out his life in the East.

There was tension, in short, between the homogenized view of the

mainstream of American literature and the varied impulses out of which that literature had actually come. For a Catholic writer, there seemed to be the choice of adopting a secularized or WASP outlook, or writing for a sectarian audience. Until only a few decades ago, there was a self-contained tradition of Catholic publishing houses and Catholic fiction. Was Edwin O'Connor the first American Catholic writer to be taken on his own terms? He was certainly one of the first.

The Last Hurrah, as everybody knows, is about Irish Catholic politicians in Boston, the last campaign of Mayor Frank Skeffington. Here is the Boston dreaded by the brahmins in John P. Marquand's novels -- not only have the Irish applied, they are now accepting applications for patronage jobs in the city they have seized. O'Connor's hero was based on Mayor James Michael Curley and the novel is studded with stage Irishmen, grotesques of the kind that the non-Irish love to hate. It is an interesting question how much of the popularity of O'Connor's novel depended on its unintentionally feeding the anti-Irish and anti-Catholic prejudices of the reader. O'Connor himself never created a character he didn't love. Indeed, it can often be said of him what John Updike said of J. P. Salinger: not even God could love his characters as much as he does.

In *The Last Hurrah*, O'Connor moves toward what will characterize his writing, a narrator who is and is not a participant in the action narrated. Adam Caulfield, Skeffington's nephew, is not the narrator

but he provides a point of view on the action that is not completely engaged. In *The Edge of Sadness* and *All in the Family*, O'Connor writes in the first person, and the voice is all but identical in the two books, as if it is the author himself we are hearing.

O'Connor's narrative voice is at once the strength and the weakness of his writing. On the one hand, the narrator is so discursive and oblique and apologetic that the reader can become impatient; on the other hand, the tone is mesmerizing and coaxes us out of our ordinary existence into the world of the novel. Catching the attention of the reader, getting him into the imaginative events of the story, has become an increasingly difficult thing to do. The attention span of readers is influenced by the kaleidoscope of images on the screen, exacerbated now by the sensory and sensuous assault that is by no means confined to MTV.

O'Connor's technique is not that of P. G. Wodehouse whose *Oldest Member* buttonholes us on the veranda of the country club to tell us a story, a story within a story, so to say. O'Connor is politely and urgently bringing to our attention events whose meaning will not be delivered up in our first response to them. O'Connor wants to meditate on the events he presents, to draw out their meaning, to share with us his sense of the *lacrimae rerum*. His first novel, *The Oracle*, dealt with a dreadful figure from the days of radio, but O'Connor could not leave the man simply as a villain. He gets beneath the skin of Christopher Usher and our tendency to

condemn begins to involve reflection on our selves. This is true of O'Connor's Frank Skeffington as well. It is not that we wish to praise and celebrate Skeffington, but O'Connor has an uncanny knack for enabling us to see ourselves in the flawed character of the mayor.

This, more than anything else, separates O'Connor from a recent type of Catholic novelist, who caters to the secularist reader by suggesting to him that all his worst fears about Catholicism are true. But caricatures of nuns and priests do not disguise the essential message: the Church is condemned because She stands athwart the moral relativism of the time. When guilt is passed off as a negative psychological state we can be sure that the sense of sin is absent. And without sin there is no Christianity.

The Edge of Sadness is one of the best novels on the priesthood ever written. *All in the Family* was taken to be based on the Kennedys, which is nonsense, but explainable no doubt because of the earlier use of James Curley as a model.

The novels of Edwin O'Connor are still easily found. Paperback editions multiply. O'Connor is a Catholic novelist who for that reason has a universal appeal.