

ARTS & LETTERS

BOOKS
Notes on
An Unfulfilled
Faulkner

A Family of His Own: A Life of Edwin O'Connor
by Charles F. Duffy
Catholic University of America
Press, 376 pages, \$49.95

By ROGER W. SMITH

Edwin O'Connor once told an acquaintance that he "would like to do for the Irish in America what Faulkner did for the South." He did not live long enough to be able to achieve this. When he died suddenly of a stroke in 1968, at the age of 49, he left behind fragments of two novels he had worked on in the last months of his life. One, tentatively titled "The Cardinal," was to focus on the Church in the post-Vatican II era; the other, "The Boy," appears to be autobiographical. O'Connor also planned to write a novel about Boston's first Irish immigrants in the mid-19th century.

In all, he published five novels of varying importance and quality. Only one is still in print.

"The Last Hurrah" has been justly termed by Arthur Schlesinger Jr. "the best American novel about urban politics." It made a legend of Boston politician James Michael Curley (on whom the book's main character, Frank Skeffington, is partly based), and its title added a phrase to the American idiom. Surprisingly for a writer who occupies a well-defined niche in American literary history — "The Last Hurrah" was the most widely read Irish-American novel since James T. Farrell's "Studs Lonigan" — O'Connor has never been the subject of a biography. Charles Duffy, a professor of English at Providence College, has taken it upon himself to remedy this defect.

Samuel Johnson first claimed, in a famous essay on the writing of biography, that "the minute details of daily life" are of the greatest biographical interest. In true Johnsonian spirit, Mr. Duffy has mined every conceivable scrap of information about O'Connor, bringing him as it were back to life.

O'Connor was notoriously averse to letter writing, but his biographer has made excellent and creative use of miscellaneous source materials and personal reminiscences to unearth details about O'Connor's student days at Notre Dame, his early career as a radio announcer and writer, and his Boston years and haunts. He worked for five years as a television critic for Boston newspapers, and his large circle of literary friends included those at the Atlantic Monthly and Wellfleet on Cape Cod, where he spent his summers.

Mr. Duffy uses O'Connor's works to illuminate the life and makes interesting speculations based on autobiographical readings of the novels and unpublished sketches. He does not hesitate to speculate about O'Connor's relationship with his father, for instance, but resists the temptation to make easy generalizations.

Mr. Duffy is also even-handed and perceptive in assessing O'Connor's strengths and weaknesses. Chief among the strengths: his humor, his gift for dialogue, and his skill for characterization — his minor characters, such as the political hangers-on in "The Last Hurrah," were said by Clifton Fadiman to be worthy of Hogarth or Daumier. A sampling of the critical comments (which are many): his wordiness and habit of making overly explicit what is clearly implied by the narrative, a penchant for nostalgia that can at times seem cloying, and his tendency to enjoy his favorite characters so much that they never leave center stage and the reader begins to tire of them.

One thing I would have liked to learn more about is writers who influenced O'Connor. Mr. Duffy notes that the novels of his co-religionist Evelyn Waugh were particular favorites of O'Connor, and that the influence of Waugh and another Catholic writer, Graham Greene, can be seen in O'Connor's works. But more information on O'Connor's reading would have been welcome. I also take issue with an occasional glibness that creeps into Mr. Duffy's prose — as, for example, in an aside in which he dismisses "the half-baked theories of the Doctor from Vienna, most of which are now in the dustbin," and his characterization of mid-20th-century Boston Brahmins: "Backsliding in finances, resting on imaginary laurels, and underperforming in sex, that class had had its noontime in Boston's weak sun."

Mr. Duffy rightly thinks that "The Edge of Sadness" (1961), the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about a priest whose career and inner conflicts are portrayed with unsparing realism, is O'Connor's best and most finely crafted novel. The book's narrative style and understated tone, avoiding both what Mr. Duffy calls "spiritual histrionics" and a Hollywood-style treatment of the priestly vocation, play to O'Connor's strengths.

"At his best," Mr. Duffy observes, "he wrote with great ethical integrity, with an unusual warmth towards his characters, with elegant wit." Similar qualities are evident in this biography — especially a sincere affection for its subject, which it is hard for the reader not to share.

Mr. Smith is a writer and editor who lives in Maspeth, Queens.