THE IRISH-AMERICAN EXPERIENCE IN THE FICTION OF EDWIN O'CONNOR

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PREFACE

In his fiction, Edwin O'Connor chronicled the final stages in the acculturation of the American Irish and the resulting attenuation of ethnic Irish distinctiveness. He focused his fictional lens on those three areas of the Irish-American experience that had the most influence on and were most influenced by life in America -- politics, religion, and the family. This study takes an interdisciplinary approach to O'Connor's novels about the American Irish. The following chapters will provide a brief historical analysis of Irish political, religious, and family life, followed by a thorough textual examination of O'Connor's handling of these themes in his fiction. Through this antiphonal style of presentation, I hope to show not only how accurately O'Connor apprehended historical facts about the American Irish, but also how skillfully he animated and enriched them through his craft as a novelist.

I was first introduced to the fiction of Edwin O'Connor in 1966, the year in which his last novel was published. I was then a sophomore at a Catholic high school in Boston, whose student population closely reflected the ethnic immigrant make-up of the city. Although there were quite a few Italians and a sprinkling of Poles, most of my classmates and virtually all of the teachers were Irish. The Last

Hurrah, I suppose, was the latter's attempt to introduce the younger generation to their ethnic heritage. Whatever the reason, the novel ranked alongside such classics as Moby Dick and Oliver Twist as required reading.

I'm afraid that like most of my fellow students, I read the novel only because it was assigned and, while I liked it well enough and thought it both funny and sad, I promptly forgot it, and O'Connor, once our classroom discussion of it had come to an end. It goes without saying that the book did little to awaken any sense of my ethnic roots. Years later, however, while doing graduate research into the history of Boston, I became interested in the story of the Irish immigration into that city, and in my own ethnicity. I decided, therefore, to re-read The Last Hurrah. While I still found the book witty and nostalgic, I was also struck not only by how accomplished it was on the level of fiction, but also by how accurate it was on a historical and sociological level.

As I read on through O'Connor's subsequent novels, I gradually realized something else: my family and I were the people O'Connor was writing about. The Buckley and Banks families had taken part in the great trans-Atlantic migration of the mid-to-late nineteenth century, and the progress of their lives had closely paralleled that of the characters in O'Connor's novels. My maternal grandparents, for example, were first-generation immigrants and both spoke with heavy brogues. My paternal grandfather, the undisputed but disputatious patriarch of the Banks clan, was a second-

generation Irishman. Like many of their contemporaries, both of my grandfathers made their assault on the American dream with the help of the political process. Each held a civil service job with the city of Boston, one as a policeman who was fired for his participation in the Boston police strike of 1919, the other as a motorman, and later an executive, with the city's transit system.

The generation that followed, the sons and daughters of these patriarchs, were born to the middle class and took advantage of educational and career opportunities denied their parents. Of the children, seven graduated from college, and among their number are a lawyer, a businessman, and a college professor. The lure of the Church, however, remained strong enough to attract two of the boys to the priesthood and two of the girls to the convent. As politics and the Church were important themes in O'Connor's novels, so too were they important in my family's life.

I wish to thank those who came before, especially Betty and Paul, for their support, the members of my committee, especially Dr. Peter C. Rollins, for their help, and Pam for her inspiration.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Edwin O'Connor died suddenly of a cerebral hemmorrhage on March 23, 1968, just four months before his fiftieth birthday. Although he died a relatively young man, O'Connor left behind an enviable legacy of personal and professional accomplishment. He was not only a popular and respected writer, but also a genuinely nice man who remained unaffected by his great success. In published eulogies and remembrances, his close friends fondly recalled him as a witty and generous companion whose infectious good humor manifested itself through his remarkable gifts as a mimic, raconteur, and magician. O'Connor's surface geniality was tempered, however, by darker undercurrents. As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. noted, "His amiability covered an idiosyncratic and almost taut personality. He was formidable in his independence, his reserve, his observant and often caustic wit, his self-possession and his self-discipline, his sense of his own identity."[1] Little wonder then, given these complex shades of light and dark, that O'Connor's close friend, Harvard Professor John V. Kelleher, called him "very Irish."[2]

Although O'Connor's career as a writer spanned only twenty-two years, he left behind a significant body of work: numerous articles, sketches, reviews, and short stories, five

published novels (one of which, I Was Dancing, was originally written as a play and ran briefly on Broadway), an unpublished novel, an unpublished play, and a children's story (Benjy, 1957). At his death, O'Connor was working simultaneously on two novels and had conceived the idea for two others. Of his five published novels, two received literary awards: the 1955 Atlantic Prize for The Last Hurrah and the 1962 Pulitzer Prize for The Edge of Sadness. Critical recognition was complemented by the resounding imprimatur of the reading public. His three major novels about the American Irish -- The Last Hurrah (1956), The Edge of Sadness (1961), and All in the Family (1966) -- were all best-sellers. O'Connor was that rare breed of author, a serious craftsman whose books also sold.

Despite the literary awards and the popular acclaim, O'Connor's work has suffered variously from the neglect, vitriol, and misconceptions of certain segments of the critical establishment. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. attributes some portion of the critical neglect to O'Connor's traditional style of storytelling:

> The sort of thing he did and the way he did it were somewhat out of fashion, at least among the younger and more modish critics, fascinated by the extremities of technique required to deal with the extremities of experience. . . . Those who found the excitement of life in the margins rather than the centralities did not hold in high esteem the older virtues of characterization, dialogue, and narrative power. Ed recognized the prevailing mood and did not much care.[3]

Edmund Wilson, who once surprised the literary world by including O'Connor in a list of authors he regularly read,

suggested that his work suffered from the specious logic that unfavorably linked a book's intrinsic literary worth to its commercial success: "Ed O'Connor became not only rich but a writer to be specially noted -- though his financial success was at once so conspicuous that the reviewers . . . were unwilling to acknowledge this." "A literary intellectual," Wilson continued, "objects to nothing so much as a best-selling book that also possesses real merit."[4]

The charge of commercialism was one that bedeviled O'Connor constantly after The Last Hurrah was published in 1956. Many reviewers, for example, insinuated that two of O'Connor's more popular novels, The Last Hurrah and All in the Family, were thinly veiled roman à clefs based respectively on the political careers of James Michael Curley and the Kennedy family. Such accusations implicitly carried with them the suggestion that not only were these novels something less than the works of a creative imagination but also that O'Connor was trading on the lives of the famous in order to prosper. While it is likely that Curley and the Kennedys inspired the basic ideas for the two novels, O'Connor's characters and their situations differ markedly from the supposed originals. Moreover, O'Connor's artistry in storytelling and in creating memorable minor characters reduces such charges to the level of the absurd.

Another common misconception sounded by some critics concerned the manner of O'Connor's rise to success. These critics described O'Connor as an "overnight sensation" whose

"first" novel had hit the "jackpot." Not wishing to forego the chance of milking another "killing" from an undiscerning public, O'Connor merely strove to repeat the formula so successfully established in 1956. The unflattering implications of such charges were clear: O'Connor was not only a lucky man but also a "professional Irishman" who greedily but deftly stroked a gullible public. The facts of O'Connor's life render such accusations groundless.

Edwin Greene O'Connor was born in Providence, Rhode Island, on July 29, 1918. He was the eldest of four children born to Dr. John V. and Mary Greene O'Connor, who were both second-generation Irish-Americans. Shortly after his birth, the family moved to Woonsocket, a mill town of about 30,000 people. O'Connor attended the public schools in Woonsocket until 1931 when he began commuting daily to the La Salle Academy in Providence, a parochial school run by the Christian Brothers.

O'Connor's boyhood experiences in Woonsocket did little to awaken a sense of his own "Irishness." He was not, for example, a product of an urban Irish ghetto where the stamp of one's ethnic identity is daily imprinted. Since his father was a doctor and fairly well-to-do, the family lived in rather pleasant surroundings in a suburb populated mostly by Yankees. The stirring of O'Connor's ethnic consciousness was in fact a long, incremental process and did not truly begin to manifest itself until after he had left home.

The first, and probably most important, step in O'Connor's career as the foremost literary chronicler of the

American Irish came in 1935 when he enrolled at Notre Dame. Largely because of its prowess in athletics, Notre Dame in the 1930s held a special significance for American Catholics. As O'Connor scholar Hugh Rank has observed, "The 'Fighting Irish' had long dominated the national football scene, and millions of American Catholics were loyal 'subway alumni' who cheered for the school which in some way symbolized their struggles and aspirations."[5] Given this extraordinary appeal, Notre Dame naturally attracted young Catholics from a variety of ethnic and geographical backgrounds, thus creating an ideal environment for the percolation of ideas and the growth of ethnic self-awareness.

Although O'Connor's reasons for choosing Notre Dame were vague, he did benefit immensely from his experiences there. He became aware, for example, of the underlying tensions that existed between ethnic groups on campus, which in turn led him to consider more closely his own Irish heritage. After The Last Hurrah was published in 1956, O'Connor revealed that he first became interested in the political make-up of an American city while he was at South Bend where he made friends with the sons of some Irish politicians from Chicago. He became so intrigued by this facet of the Irish-American experience that when he visited his friends' homes in Chicago, he created opportunities for the veteran pols to discuss their trade: "I'd open an avenue for them to discuss politics and then sit back and listen. I'd take careful note of everything they said. I'd put it down in a notebook later."[6]

O'Connor's experiences at Notre Dame awakened his interest not only in the Irish but also in writing. Under the influence of a young English instructor named Frank O'Malley (to whom he later dedicated The Edge of Sadness), O'Connor early on switched his major from journalism to English and, sandwiched between his job as a broadcaster at the college radio station, began his first attempts at writing. He wrote articles for his hometown newspaper and short stories for the college literary magazine. He also received his first rejection slips from national publications during this period. Though his experience was limited and his lack of success constant, O'Connor had decided by his senior year to make writing his career.

Although O'Connor's interests in writing and in his ethnic heritage were sparked almost simultaneously, they would not merge in any significant way for over a decade after his graduation from Notre Dame in 1939. The intervening years were spent learning his craft and trying to survive. From 1940 to 1942, he used his college experience in radio to secure jobs as a broadcaster at stations up and down the East Coast. In his spare time, he wrote satirical sketches about life behind the microphone and some short stories. His failure rate was consistent; nothing sold.

The war provided a respite from rejection slips and hosiery commercials. In 1942, O'Connor enlisted in the Coast Guard and spent his first year patrolling the beaches of Cape Cod and taking advanced chemical warfare training in Baltimore, Maryland. O'Connor was transferred in 1943 to the

Public Information Office in Boston where he served until his discharge in 1945. O'Connor's transfer to Boston, like his stay at Notre Dame, proved to be another important step in his growing sense of ethnic awareness. His immediate superior in Boston was Lt. Louis Brems, a former vaudevillian who had later served as the city's official greeter. An insider in the bizarre world of Boston's politics and a great raconteur, Brems delighted O'Connor with his stories about the city and its peculiar and ferocious brand of politics.

O'Connor's stay in Boston also coincided with the final administration of Mayor James Michael Curley, a compelling figure who for fifty years had been a dominant force in Boston's political life. In 1945, Curley had just been released from jail for mail fraud, and now in his seventies, ill and exhausted, was clearly enjoying his last political "hurrah." Brems' anecdotes and Curley's antics served not only to keep alive O'Connor's interest in the Irish-American experience, but they also functioned as vital links in the chain of events that eventually led to The Last Hurrah.

O'Connor's career as a professional writer can properly be dated from 1946, for in that year, he quit his job as a radio broadcaster in Boston and decided to earn his income solely through his pen. There must have been times when he seriously questioned that decision, however, because in the next ten years he eked out a precarious existence as a free-lance writer, performing an assortment of odd literary jobs. He wrote a column for the Boston Herald in which he reviewed current radio and television programs; he sold an occasional

satirical sketch, usually concerning radio, to the Atlantic Monthly, with whose staff he had become friendly; he taught writing for a year at Boston College's night school; and he helped edit a collection of Fred Allen's radio scripts. Despite his steady employment at one job or another, O'Connor never earned enough to escape the life of a boarding house roomer in Boston's Back Bay.

O'Connor's free-lance work served its purpose, however, as it allowed him to concentrate on serious fiction. O'Connor experimented with both the short story and the novel in the decade after 1946, but with only mixed results. He managed, for example, to publish just three short stories, two in the Atlantic Monthly ("The Gentle Perfect Knight," September, 1947, and "The Inner Self," April, 1950) and one in The Yale Review ("Parish Reunion," September, 1950). None of these stories is particularly memorable. In fact, of considerably more interest are two of O'Connor's unpublished stories, "C.B." and "De Mortuis." Both written about 1950, these stories contain some characters and scenes (eg. the Knocko Minihan wake scene in "De Mortuis") which were later incorporated into The Last Hurrah. Thus they stand as perhaps the earliest instances of O'Connor's conscious attempt to weave the Irish theme into his fiction.

Despite O'Connor's flirtation with the short story genre, his primary emphasis lay with the novel, and he attempted at least four during the postwar decade. The two earliest ones, probably dating from the mid-to-late 1940s, exist only as fragments. Anthony Cantwell is a melodrama

which centers on the title character's unwitting involvement in intrigue on a college campus after his discharge from the army. Luther Sudworth relates the exploits of a country clod who is elevated to a position of authority in a New York City radio station. Both fragments are less than distinguished efforts and reflect concerns current to O'Connor at the time of their composition. Neither draws at all on the Irish theme.

The frustration that marked O'Connor's early efforts as a writer seemed at an end in 1951 with the publication of his first novel, The Oracle. Originally entitled Top of the World, The Oracle was first rejected by the Atlantic Monthly Press, then published by Harpers. O'Connor's excitement at having published his first novel was quickly soured, however, by the book's dismal reception. While the reviews were extremely uneven, the public's response was the most damaging; the novel was ignored. O'Connor, who once estimated the domestic royalties of The Oracle to be $720, commented on the book's failure many years later:

> In 1951 I published a novel called The Oracle. Publication day came and publication day went -- and so did The Oracle. In silence. Total silence. . . . At the time it seemed a disaster to me, possibly even a conspiracy on the part of my then publisher to conceal me from the public. Now, though, I know that what happened to The Oracle was precisely what happens to most first novels: it simply got lost.[7]

The Oracle is a satire whose twin targets are the "popular cant of the late 1940s" and the florid sanctimony of the national radio commentators of the era.[8] The novel

centers on two weeks in the life of Christopher Usher, a pompous radio broadcaster in the mold of Gabriel Heatter. In these two weeks, Usher tries to renegotiate his contract with his sponsor, Bernie Udolpho, entertain his garrulous guest, General Walter "Beak" Blackburn, and play loyal husband to his long-suffering wife, Meredith, all the while trying to placate his beautiful but insipid mistress, Lura. The politically reactionary and loutishly sensual Usher blunders his way through this series of potential pitfalls to achieve a victory of sorts. He wins a fat new contract from Udolpho but ruins his marriage when his wife discovers his midnight caperings with the mindless Lura. As the novel ends, Usher mourns the loss of his wife, but only briefly, for he realizes that his new contract will ensure that his five million faithful listeners will not now be left to wander alone in darkness.

While a competent first novel, with some bright flashes of dialogue and humor, The Oracle probably deserved the response it received. The characters (who are given symbolic names), for example, are little more than stereotypes who evoke minimal interest much less sympathy. Usher, especially, never quite comes off as believable; he is simply too unrelievedly loathesome. The dialogue, while occasionally pointed and witty, is more often flat and banal. Lura's puerile prattling ("You know what you need Chris Baby? You need a drinkie winkie.") is particularly dreary. O'Connor's plot is rather hackneyed but is handled with some sophistication. He successfully spins together the various threads of

the story without sacrificing coherence or pace. The climactic scene in the novel, the unmasking of Usher's infidelity, however, is embarrassingly contrived and suggestive of a vaudeville skit.

Despite his discouragement at the failure of The Oracle, O'Connor immediately began work on a new novel called A Young Man of Promise. The story concerns a young man's struggle, amid a collapsed love affair and conflicts with his family, to realize his long-delayed ambition to be a novelist. After completing the 227-page manuscript in 1952, however, O'Connor discarded it. With new enthusiasm, confidence, and perhaps -- as Schlesinger, Jr., has suggested -- "a sudden sense of inner recognition," O'Connor turned instead to a novel about the Irish-American experience in politics.[9] Thus began the four-year writing of The Last Hurrah.

The immediate reasons why O'Connor's hitherto peripheral but growing interest in the Irish suddenly blossomed in 1952 as the central theme of his art remains something of a mystery. O'Connor never discussed the moment when he first conceived the idea for The Last Hurrah. The cumulative impact of his residence in Boston since 1943, however, seems to have been a major contributing factor, the final step in the long process of ethnic self-awareness. As Schlesinger, Jr., has noted:

> Boston had precipitated a new set of concerns. In Woonsocket Ed had lived in a predominantly Yankee neighborhood. As a child, he had probably never heard a good Irish brogue. Boston now confronted him with the Irish-American experience; it brought his latent sense

> of Irishness to the surface, and it soon established the argument of his new book.[10]

The new book was to be the turning point in O'Connor's life.

O'Connor's observation of Boston's exciting and sometimes weird political scene revealed to him a central fact about Irish-American life in general at the halfway mark in the century. The Irish, in the final stages of succumbing to the lure of Americanization, were losing their distinctive ethnic personality, their Irishness. The aging process was daily taking its toll of the older generations, and improved educational and economic opportunities were rendering the younger generations indistinguishable from the mass of other Americans. The Irish were rapidly blending in to the vast American landscape in what some historians would consider a classic example of the melting pot success story.

The delineation of the last stages in this process of acculturation, and the conflict between the generations that inevitably ensued from it, was to emerge as the central theme of all O'Connor's novels about the Irish in America. With sociological and historical acuity, O'Connor fictionally charted "the exhaustion of the distinctively Irish impulse in the Irish-American community."[11] He concentrated his focus on those three areas of the Irish-American experience which had the most impact on, and were most influenced by, life in America -- politics, religion, and the family.

Unlike those who champion the leavening process inherent in the melting pot theory, however, O'Connor felt a profound ambivalence about the blanket of blandness that seemed to be

settling down over Irish-American life. While he acknowledged change and recognized Irish gains in respectability and standard of living that came with assimilation, he mourned the loss of ethnic color and style. He found no triumph in conformity.

That O'Connor first chose politics as a vehicle to explore the evolution of Irish America is not surprising, despite the fact that he was no student of politics. Brems' anecdotes and Curley's political swansong were still fresh in his mind. He realized, too, the special relationship that existed in America between the Irish and politics as a mode of upward mobility. As O'Connor later explained, "I wanted to do a novel on the whole Irish-American business. What the Irish got in America, they got through politics; so, of course, I had to use a political framework."[12] Moreover, the politics of the Irish, especially in Boston, had always had about it an antic, offbeat quality that delighted O'Connor and that he did not wish to see forgotten. In an interview with Lewis Nichols, O'Connor commented on this aspect of Irish politics: "As I began thinking, it seemed to me that the older day was a wonderful time, the time of the eccentric in politics. It was both wonderful and not fully appreciated, mostly misunderstood."[13]

The Last Hurrah, originally entitled Not Moisten an Eye, was submitted to the Atlantic Monthly Press in January, 1955, won the Atlantic Prize in March of the same year, and was published in February of 1956. The novel chronicles the last campaign of Mayor Frank Skeffington, the aging, patern-

alistic boss of a big city on the Eastern seaboard of the United States. O'Connor conducts the reader on a hilarious and instructive tour of a disappearing public ritual as he brilliantly evokes the sights and sounds of a bygone political era. He shows us in intimate detail the world of the Irish boss: the speeches, wakes, deals, betrayals, and odd political hangers-on. Dominating the novel is the seventy-two-year-old Skeffington, a talented but corrupt dinosaur who roared out of the Irish slums at the turn of the century to dominate his city's politics for the next fifty years. Skeffington's crushing political defeat and death at the novel's conclusion suggest the triumph of the assimilative process and the end of an era in Irish-American life.

Even though O'Connor secretly felt that his novel would be a hit, he surely must have been amazed by the enormity of its success. The Last Hurrah was an immediate sensation. Hugh Rank outlines the scope of the book's favorable reception:

> In February, 1956, The Last Hurrah was published; by October, the book had gone through fifteen printings in hardcover (300,000+); in the following years, paperback sales would exceed a million copies. In addition, the novel was selected for the Book-of-the-Month Club, the Reader's Digest Condensed Books (for which O'Connor received $80,000 to salve the pain of seeing it pruned), and various smaller book clubs. Columbia Pictures bought the movie rights for $150,000.[14]

The novel was also warmly received by the vast majority of the critics and reviewers. The initially muted voices of the boobirds began to squawk in earnest only after the opening wave of approbation had crested and after O'Connor's

subsequent novels also proved to be popular.

O'Connor's new fame and wealth did not appreciably affect the man, although his material circumstances improved considerably, but they did confirm to the writer that in the saga of the American Irish, he had found his true metier. Except for the playful interlude of Benjy, a satiric children's fairy tale published in 1957, O'Connor was thereafter content to plumb deeper into the Irish-American experience in his fiction. He therefore set to work in 1958 on a novel about another, more interior, facet of the Irish, their religion.

The Edge of Sadness, more subdued in tone and more structurally complex then its predecessor, finally appeared in 1961. The story concerns the struggle of the narrator, Fr. Hugh Kennedy, to overcome alcoholism and a sagging vocation occasioned by his father's death from cancer. Fr. Kennedy is aided in his recovery by the Carmody family, headed by its crotchety old patriarch, Charlie. Through Fr. Kennedy's relations with the various Carmodys, he rediscovers his lost faith and accepts his fate in the decaying parish to which he has been exiled by the Bishop.

Although the story concerns one priest's attempt to achieve grace, The Edge of Sadness also reveals much about the changing relationship between the Catholic Church and its Irish-American adherents. As in The Last Hurrah, O'Connor suggests that the assimilative process has loosened the old loyalties and caused new problems for the Church and its faithful. As one era in Church-Irish relations fades into

history, and another slowly emerges, O'Connor comments on the merits of both and suggests a direction for the latter to procede.

Although The Edge of Sadness must have surprised and disappointed many readers who expected the same energy and humor that distinguished The Last Hurrah, the book was very well received. Many reviewers, especially those writing in the Catholic journals, singled out for praise O'Connor's characterization of Fr. Kennedy, calling it one of the few realistic portrayals of a priest in American fiction. The pinnacle of critical approval came, of course, the following year when O'Connor was awarded the Pulitzer Prize.

O'Connor's professional triumph was followed a few months later by a personal one -- his marriage to Veniette Caswell Weil, a divorcee with one son. According to the accounts of his friends, O'Connor's marriage was a happy one that genuinely enriched his life. Msgr. Francis J. Lally, an old friend who married the O'Connors, remembered the long-time bachelor as a "happy man, though not without his moments of Irish melancholy. After his marriage, however, happiness shone out of him as if he had swallowed the sun."[15]

Marriage not only brightened O'Connor's life, but it also opened him to new experiences which were later reflected in his fiction. In I Was Dancing (1964) and All in the Family (1966), O'Connor's main topic was the Irish-American family. Although Irish family life and the conflict between the generations were treated extensively in his earlier novels, here they emerged as the central theme. In

All in the Family, moreover, O'Connor took his first tentative step toward creating believable female characters. In his previous work, women were either absent or mere stereotypes. In either case, they played no major role in the action. While the female characters in All in the Family are not especially well drawn or memorable, they are more numerous and play larger roles.

I Was Dancing, which was originally written as a play (and suffers somewhat as a result), deals with cagey old Daniel Considine's struggle to avoid being sent to a rest home by his son. Daniel had abandoned Tom and his mother years ago and, upon his retirement, moves in with his estranged son and his wife Ellen. In the battle to determine Daniel's future residence, Tom and his father, in a series of verbal confrontations, lay bare long-concealed and mutual hostility until, finally, Daniel is forced to move. Although Tom wins the struggle, he feels neither vindication nor satisfaction.

In his last published novel, All in the Family, O'Connor returns to the theme of familial conflict among the Irish, but in a more complex and revealing way. Although the story takes place amid a political backdrop, the alienation that develops among the three generations of the Kinsella clan makes up the core of the plot. The novel concerns the attempt by the wealthy Jimmy Kinsella and his sons to take control of city and state politics in order to institute needed reform. The political aspirations of the two sons meet with spectacular success but, in the course of their

ascent to power, they clash over a matter of principle and bring the facade of family unity crashing down about them. The story is narrated by Jack Kinsella, the boys' cousin, who is himself involved in a family breakup when his wife leaves him. Jack's story runs parallel to and comments on that of his cousins.

In both of these novels, as in his earlier ones, the central conflict occurs between somewhat crude, hard-driving, second-generation fathers and their more polished, Americanized sons. Though linked by blood and a common heritage, and though separated by just thirty years, they are worlds apart. O'Connor suggests that as these sons (and daughters) grow into maturity, they turn away from the values of their parents, a process which inevitably produces conflict. The gulf that separates them is a measure of the distance that the third generation has traveled down the road to assimilation and the concomitant sloughing off of their ethnic identity.

In the two remaining years of his life, O'Connor experienced an unprecedented spurt of creativity that augured well for the future. Despite the failure of I Was Dancing on Broadway, he wrote another play entitled A Traveler from Brazil, began work on two novels, and hatched the idea for two others. Although O'Connor finished the play, he did not have time to polish it, so it has remained unpublished. The fragments of two novels that O'Connor was working on at the time of his death (one of the novels ends rather dramatically in mid-sentence) have been published in The Best and

the Last of Edwin O'Connor. These novels-in-progress, when combined with the planned story he never began, suggest the direction that O'Connor's fiction would have taken in the coming years.

The first of these two fragments is called simply The Cardinal. Just as All in the Family tells the story of the political generation that succeeded Skeffington's, The Cardinal was O'Connor's follow-up on the state of the Church as he had depicted it in The Edge of Sadness. The plot centers on the elderly Cardinal of a large city who learns that he is dying of cancer. Faced with imminent death, the Cardinal speculates on both his successor and on the direction the Church will take in the changing world following Vatican II. The latter idea would probably have presented O'Connor with a severe challenge because, unlike his earlier story which dealt with the end of an era, this novel was undertaken while the winds of change still swirled and the direction of the Church was still unclear. Perhaps, as John V. Kelleher suggests, O'Connor realized the difficulty and stopped working on this novel to take up his other project entitled The Boy.[16]

According to Hugh Rank, The Boy was clearly intended to be O'Connor's most autobiographical work, drawing on the facts of his youth in Woonsocket.[17] Although in some ways a novel of suspense, The Boy focuses on the relationship between a son and his father. The novel probably would have drawn on O'Connor's complex relationship with his own father, and with his new son. Esther Yntema, O'Connor's editor, was

enthusiastic about the outcome because "all sorts of inhibitions and adhesions had come unstuck" as a result of the book's autobiographical nature.[18] Had O'Connor finished it, The Boy probably would have provided a sharpened perspective on the problems afflicting the different generations of Irish-American families.

Of the two novels O'Connor planned to write but had not yet committed to paper, the first, a story about a publisher, is not particularly relevant to this study; the other, however, the story of a first-generation Irish youth set sometime in the mid-nineteenth century, suggests the general purpose of O'Connor's work. He intended to flesh out the entire saga of the Irish-American experience by depicting that era just before the rise of Skeffington and his ilk. If, as O'Connor once stated, he wanted "to do for the Irish in America what Faulkner did for the South," this projected novel was a necessary step.[19]

The list of labels applied by critics to O'Connor in an attempt to categorize him as a novelist is long and varied: political, sociological, historical, Catholic, ethnic. He has even been described as a local colorist. Although O'Connor is none of these exclusively, he is all of them in part. If it is at all useful to classify novelists in this way, perhaps the most appropriate designation for O'Connor is that of the novelist of manners. A writer who works in this vein endeavors to delineate the mores, practices, and values of a particular group, or class, of people in a particular social context. Through his characters' speech, dress, and

manners, the novelist reveals a way of life, one that is either being challenged or in the process of change. As a novelist of manners, O'Connor is a lineal descendant of such American writers as Howells, James, Wharton, Fitzgerald, and Marquand. In fact, he has more in common with these novelists than he does with James Farrell whose naturalism places him alongside Crane, Norris, and Dreiser. Moreover, O'Connor, unlike Farrell, has no ideological axes to grind, no desire to hang scalps on his belt.

Implicit in terming anyone a novelist of manners is the fact that such an author must have a thorough knowledge of and familiarity with the people and social context he writes about. Although O'Connor was not a prodigious researcher, he had a remarkable ear, a good memory, and a facility for asking the right people the right questions. He knew his material well.

How well he used that material in his fiction is the focus of this study. The following chapters will present, in antiphonal fashion, a brief historical look at the main strands of Irish-American life -- politics, religion, and the family -- followed by an examination of O'Connor's approach to these themes as it is revealed in his novels. The chapters dealing with his novels will show that, through a masterful combination of craft and imagination, O'Connor apprehended through the fictional life of his characters a truth about the Irish-American experience that the cold facts of history sometimes fail to convey.

ENDNOTES

[1]Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., ed., The Best and the Last of Edwin O'Connor (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 34.

[2]John V. Kelleher, "Edwin O'Connor and the Irish-American Process," Atlantic Monthly, July 1968, p. 48.

[3]Schlesinger, Jr., p. 30.

[4]Edmund Wilson, "The Great Baldini: A Memoir and a Collaboration," Atlantic Monthly, Oct. 1969, pp. 64-65.

[5]Hugh Rank, Edwin O'Connor (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 19. I am indebted to Rank's book for much of the biographical information, and for the data on O'Connor's unpublished works, in this section of the paper.

[6]James F. Leonard, "O'Connor Career Shaped by Priest," Boston Post, 14 Feb. 1956. Sec. 1, p. 13, col. 2.

[7]Edwin O'Connor, "James Michael Curley and The Last Hurrah," Atlantic Monthly, Sept. 1961, p. 49.

[8]Schlesinger, Jr., p. 39.

[9]Schlesinger, Jr., p. 9.

[10]Schlesinger, Jr., p. 9.

[11]Schlesinger, Jr., p. 13.

[12]Edwin O'Connor, as quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., ed., The Best and the Last of Edwin O'Connor (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 9.

[13]Lewis Nichols, "Talk with Mr. O'Connor," New York Times Book Review, 5 Feb. 1956, p. 18, col. 1.

[14]Rank, p. 60.

[15]Msgr. Francis J. Lally, "Fragments of Novels," Boston Globe, 22 Feb. 1970, p. 79, col. 4.

[16]John V. Kelleher, "The 'Cardinal' Fragment: Introduction," in The Best and the Last of Edwin O'Connor, ed. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 404.

[17]Rank, pp. 190-191.

[18]Esther Yntema, as quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., ed. The Best and the Last of Edwin O'Connor (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 28.

[19]Edwin O'Connor, as quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., ed. The Best and the Last of Edwin O'Connor (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 11.

CHAPTER II

THE POLITICAL BOOTSTRAP

On election day, the precinct captain was dutifully stationed outside the polling booth, his keen eyes ever alert for prospective votes. Suddenly, he spied a constituent known to be accursedly independent of spirit enter the room. Cautiously approaching his fellow Irishman, the precinct captain asked the man how he would cast his ballot. Upon hearing the response, the captain realized that this free-thinker had no real grasp of the issues at stake. He therefore offered the man a dollar to reflect on the error of his ways and perhaps change his mind. The whispered, but obviously heated, exchange that ensued might have led the casual observer to suspect that the voter was outraged by the captain's rather blatant assault on his integrity and the democratic process. This observer would have been wrong; for shortly thereafter, the voter, by now clearly exasperated, stepped back from the captain and loudly demanded, "Either give me the extra dollar or I'll vote my conscience."

Whether apocryphal or not, the preceding anecdote calls to mind that epoch in American urban politics when the Irish ruled the cities. The heyday of Irish urban hegemony roughly encompassed those tumultuous years between the Civil War and

the great Depression which saw America transformed into a powerful modern nation by four great historical movements: Westward expansion, industrialization, immigration, and urbanization. The Irish played an integral role in each of these movements. They built the canals and railroads that opened the West, they provided the manpower necessary for economic growth, and they manned the machines in the nation's burgeoning factories and mills. It was in the cities, however, that the Irish had their greatest impact. As the first swell in the eventual tidal wave of immigrants that engulfed the nation, the Irish exploded into the tiny confines of the walking cities, forced them to expand upward and outward to accommodate them, and then provided the muscles to accomplish that growth which their presence had necessitated. From this lowly pick-and-shovel beginning, the Irish went on to rule the cities that had once scorned them as barbaric interlopers. Their crowning political achievement came, of course, in 1960 when the grandson of a Boston ward boss was elected president of the United States.

Through his fiction, Edwin O'Connor attempted to chart the evolution of Irish political activity in the United States, to capture the drama of their progression from the tenement house to the White House, from "Bathhouse" John Coughlin to President John F. Kennedy. In The Last Hurrah, he treated the rise and fall of the era of the boss and, in subsequent novels, especially All in the Family, he portrayed the new generation of Irish politicians that succeeded the boss. As O'Connor himself acknowledged when he journeyed to

Ireland while writing The Last Hurrah, the full force and significance of this drama is incompletely rendered if it is confined only to the American stage, for it was on the Auld Sod, in Ireland, that the story actually began and the character of the players was formed.

Ireland's bitterly antagonistic relationship with England has been the dominant factor in its history.[1] English attempts to conquer, exploit, and even colonize Ireland stretch back nearly eight hundred years. The Normans tried first to subjugate Ireland in 1169 under Henry II and succeeded in conquering only the eastern part of the country. They established some forts and towns, but these were merely isolated islands of Norman control surrounded by a sea of untamed Irish.[2] Succeeding English monarchs made periodic forays into Ireland in an attempt to consolidate their hold on the island, but these expeditions met with little more success. English preoccupation with foreign wars and internal conflicts, coupled with Irish intransigence, ruled out total subjugation during the Middle Ages. In fact, by the sixteenth century, the Irish had begun to absorb the Norman stock into their culture.[3] As George Macaulay Trevelyan comments, the English failure to impose some kind of order in Ireland had lasting effects: "England had proved too weak to conquer and govern Ireland, but strong enough to prevent her from learning to govern herself." When the Tudors later adopted a policy of conquest, Trevelyan continues, "it was in an age too late, an age of religious cleavage, commercial competition and national self-consciousness all in their crudest form."[4]

The year 1534 is an important one in the history of Ireland's relationship with England because in that year Henry VIII broke with Rome and established control over both Church and state. As Goldwin Smith asserts, this development was as much a product of the rise of political nationalism in England as it was of Henry's dispute with Pope Clement VII over his marital affairs.[5] In an attempt to consolidate his political and religious reformation, Henry naturally attempted to extend his power over Ireland. J. C. Beckett comments on Henry's methods and his rationale, and their consequences for Ireland:

> The process was maintained with varying degrees of intensity and by methods of diplomacy as well as of war, and its primary purpose was defense rather than aggression; but it led to the military subjugation of Ireland at the end of Elizabeth's reign. Probably some such development was inevitable. The Tudor monarchy could not for ever tolerate the existence of a half-subdued dependency which, if not controlled by England, might soon be controlled by England's continental enemies.[6]

The attempts by Henry and his successors to impose the new order on Ireland were so heavyhanded, however, that they engendered an increasing hostility among the Irish.

Ultimately, the Catholic Irish rejected Henry's break with Rome and refused to accept his new religious dictates. According to George Potter, the injection of religion into what was essentially a political fray proved fateful for the Irish: "As Catholicism fashioned an Irish nationalism, so an English nationalism attached itself to Protestantism. In Ireland, Catholicism was the means by which the Gaelic identity was preserved. In England, Protestantism was

identified with English liberties threatened both at home and abroad by Catholic power."[7] Thus to the bitterness of the political dispute between England and Ireland was added the intensity of a religious struggle between Protestants and Catholics.

Successive English governments attempted to subdue Ireland by colonizing the country. They accomplished this by driving the Irish aristocracy from their land and implanting English settlers in their stead.[8] The Irish noblemen fought back furiously, and bloody insurrections followed at regular intervals. In 1603, for example, the English crushed a revolt led by Hugh O'Neill of Ulster in Northern Ireland. After O'Neill's defeat the British thoroughly colonized Ulster by resettling thousands of Scottish Presbyterians who soon owned most of the land and dominated every facet of political and economic life. Nearly 380 years later, the unfortunate consequences of this resettlement policy can still be seen in the vicious sectarian conflict now ravaging Northern Ireland.

Despite O'Neill's defeat and the loss of Ulster, the Irish fought on against the steady tide of English encroachment throughout the seventeenth century. The results, however, were nothing short of disastrous. In 1649, Cromwell launched a "war of extermination" against Catholic Ireland and by 1652 had succeeded in crushing all opposition.[9] The zealous Cromwell then imposed drastic punishment on the Irish for their stubborn resistance by doling out most of the conquered territory to his soldiers and supporters and by

selling thousands of Irish into slavery in the West Indies.[10]

The flames of revolt burst forth again in 1688 when Ireland allied its cause to that of the deposed James II. The Protestant forces of William and Mary finally quelled this uprising at the Battle of the Boyne in 1690.[11] A year later, Irish resistance was exhausted. The devastation left behind by the war was complete. The aristocratic class, from which Ireland drew its leaders, was thoroughly decimated, its members either dead or in exile on the continent. The remainder of the Irish, mostly small farmers, fared, if possible, even worse. Stripped of their legal right to own land, forced to till the soil for a (frequently absentee) British landlord, and subjected to exorbitant rents, the Irish farming class was systematically reduced to a landless peasantry whose existence degenerated into an endless cycle of poverty, degradation, and humiliation.

Hard on the heels of this economic subjugation came religious persecution in the form of a new penal code. In his book on the Irish, Alexander M. Sullivan thoroughly summarizes the extent of these laws:

> The Irish were forbidden to receive education; exercise his religion; enter a profession; hold public office; engage in trade or commerce; live in a corporate town or within five miles thereof; own a horse of greater value than five pounds; purchase land; lease land; accept a mortgage on land in security for a loan; vote; keep any arms for his protection; hold a life annuity; buy land from a Protestant; rent any land worth more than thirty shillings a year; reap from his land any profit exceeding a third of the rent; be a guardian to a child; leave his infant children under Catholic guardianship when dying; attend Catholic worship; and compelled by law to attend Protestant worship. The priest was banned

> by law and hunted with bloodhounds. The school master was banned and hunted with bloodhounds. There sprang up in those days the infamous trade of priest-hunting, "five pounds" being equally the government price for the head of a priest or the head of a wolf.[12]

Although the new penal laws were erratically enforced, they testify to the intensity of English fear of both the Irish and Catholicism; they also underscore the overwhelming nature of Irish powerlessness.

According to Edward Levine, Ireland had become by the mid-eighteenth century "an agricultural colony whose essential market function was to serve as a source of raw materials for English manufacturers."[13] On every level, from the central government in London, to the civil functionaries located throughout Ireland, to the village landlord, the tentacles of English power ruthlessly encircled the already destitute Irish and squeezed them dry. The Irish were legally powerless to resist English oppression, since recourse to the elective process and justice in the courts were denied them. In any despute, either with the Crown or with the local landlord, the Irish could expect no justice and very little sympathy.

As a result of trying to cope with this nightmarishly oppressive system, the Irish, over the course of several generations, developed a unique set of political attitudes. The Irish political ethos emphasized personal justice, organizational strength, loyalty, and at its core, an unbridled quest for power. That pursuit of power should be the foundation of the Irish political ethos is not surprising given the nature of Irish life in the eighteenth and

nineteenth centuries. In every facet of their daily lives, the Irish were humiliated by their helplessness in the face of English power. Regularly victimized by their English rulers, the Irish came to respect naked political power and to develop an insatiable appetite for that which they had never themselves possessed.

Unfortunately, Irish hunger for power emerged in a context bereft of moderating influences. Nowhere in their ravaged land was there a standard of political morality which may have tempered their quest for power or channelled it into constructive outlets. As Potter asserts, "The corrupt construction of Irish society made politics synonymous with 'interest,' not public, but private."[14] The acquisition of power for the Irish became its own end and was not to be lost in the cause of principle.

If the Irish developed a profound, albeit somewhat unhealthy, respect for power during the penal code era, they developed an equally strong disrespect for the law. For the Irish, the law, as administered by the local English magistrates or by the landlord, was just another tool of oppression, a device used not for the purpose of seeking justice but of frustrating it. Since Ireland was the dumping ground for the corrupt or merely inept in the English judicial system, even disputes between fellow Irishmen were frequently settled without recourse to the law.[15] As Levine has noted, "The Irish were compelled by the nature of the legal system to bargain for justice and forced to resort to illegitimate means to gain some consideration of their

claims. Otherwise, justice was predetermined."[16]

The Irish had long practiced the tribal tradition of bringing one's claim before a local chieftain or village nobleman for adjudication, and in the absence of a body of written laws, the personal appeal was an honorable, if somewhat unpredictable, way of seeking justice. During the Penal Code era, however, this time-honored tradition of personalized justice was perverted by a system which demanded duplicity, bribery, and connections. For the Irish, the law, like political power, evolved into merely another device that was to be used in one's self-interest, not in the interests of the body politic.

The pent-up frustration and rage of the Irish finally found an outlet in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in various forms of political activism, both legal and otherwise. Some Irishmen, perhaps motivated more by blind hatred and the desire for revenge than by the urge for reform, turned to violence in the form of secret terrorist organizations such as the Molly Maguires and the Whiteboys. These groups exacted their own brand of justice through intimidation, arson, and assassination. Since the terrorists had no specific political aims, they accomplished nothing in the way of loosening the shackles of English oppression. In fact, says Potter, the seemingly endless cycle of attack and reprisal that they precipitated may have served to increase Irish tolerance of violence as a means of settling disputes: "Systematic oppression over the centuries had blunted moral and humane sentiments regarding violence. . . . Thus a man who otherwise

enjoyed the reputation of quiet behavior and decent conduct would commit brutal violence or kill for the cause."[17] Such wanton acts of violence also served to stiffen British resolve.

Despite these substantial drawbacks, the terrorists did provide one tangible benefit: they introduced the Irish to some of the rudiments of political organization. Membership in a terrorist group taught the value of coordinated effort, leadership, tactics, and above all, loyalty. If the terrorists accomplished little else that was helpful, the schooling they provided in political techniques such as these proved valuable assets to a demoralized and fragmented Irish society.

Irish political consciousness was dramatically propelled forward in the early nineteenth century by the formation in 1823 of the Catholic Association led by Daniel O'Connell. The Association's principal aim was to achieve religious equality for Ireland's Catholics. O'Connell realized early on that that goal was impossible without the participation of the Irish masses; he therefore instituted a system whereby everyone who joined the association paid a small monthly subscription fee. The monthly dues not only financed the Association's agitation, but they also allowed the subscribers to feel that they had contributed something palpable to their own welfare. The success of the movement was also enhanced by the participation of the parish priests who organized the people in their local parish, spoke favorably of the Association's aims from the pulpit, and

supervised the collection of fees. The collaboration of the priests and their parishioners linked politics and religion ever more closely in Ireland and cemented the bond between the masses and the clergy.

After five years of constant political agitation, the Irish finally wrung a concession from the British government in the form of the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1828, which gave Irish Catholics the right to sit in Parliament and hold political office; in return, O'Connell agreed to disband the Catholic Association. Although the heady potential inherent in the Emancipation Act to improve the thoroughly degraded tenor of Irish life was thwarted in practice by British chicanery, the Irish gained invaluable insights into the ways and means of the political process. They recognized the importance of a tight organizational structure, of applying pressure to turn out the votes, and of propagandizing one's cause and convincing the masses of their stake in the struggle. According to Lawrence McCaffrey, the cumulative effect of the Association's agitation was to school "the Irish in the art of democratic politics" and to politicize the Irish masses.[18]

By 1829, when the Catholic Association was dissolved, the Irish had developed an active political life and a working set of political attitudes. The tragic conditions of their life had nurtured in them a deep respect and desire for power, an equally strong disrespect for the law, and a talent for organization and the loyalty with which to sustain it. The political skills that the Irish acquired did not,

however, enable them to improve significantly the dismal conditions in Ireland. In fact, just twenty years after the passage of the Emancipation Act, the Irish suffered the cruelest blow in their long and tragic history, the potato famines. The straightjacket of British oppression was simply too tight to allow the Irish to benefit from their political indoctrination. Ironically, it was in America that the Irish first made good use of their political know-how.

Irish political ascendancy in America's cities was not, however, an overnight occurrence. In fact, the Irish were severely handicapped upon their arrival both by their own limitations and by those imposed upon them by the host society. Many of the Irish who emigrated to America prior to the potato famines of the mid-to-late 1840s chose to do so in the hope of finding a better life. They were largely from the lower middle and middle classes -- artisans, farmers, and some professionals -- and were fairly well equipped, financially and socially, to make the transition and re-establish themselves in a new country.[19] The Irish who emigrated to America after the famines came from the lowest levels of Irish society. The only choice these broken and penniless peasants had was almost sure death by starvation or emigration. So, by the hundreds of thousands they came, the poorest of the poor, driven from their native land in a desperate panic.

The problems confronting the newly arrived Irish immigrants were complex and numerous. Since the majority of these Irish were unskilled, illiterate, and impoverished,

they remained either partially or totally unemployed for long periods of time. Those who were lucky enough or strong enough to find jobs immediately were forced to work as common laborers. They often worked up to fifteen hours a day, seven days a week, for as little as one dollar a day. Usually every member of the family was put to work in some capacity. The scarcity of available jobs and the debasing forces of discrimination, however, were such that few first generation immigrant families advanced beyond the poverty level.

The living conditions of these destitute Irish immigrants mirrored their position on the bottom of the economic stratum of urban society. Every possible inch of the urban landscape was converted to accommodate the thousands of immigrants whose financial ruin and clannishness led them to settle in clearly defined, low-rent, tenement areas. The result of the sudden and massive influx of Irish into distinct areas of the cities introduced native Americans to the hideous reality of slum living. Overcrowding, primitive sewage systems, and severe indigence, bred the squalid conditions in which laziness, disorder, crime, prostitution, disease, insanity, pauperism, intemperance, and infant mortality could flourish. Given these circumstances, it is little wonder that Boston's Irish lived an average of only fourteen years after their arrival.[20] For the post-famine Irish, the transition from a rural, community-centered existence to an urban society which demanded individual initiative was extraordinarily harsh.

The difficulty in adapting to life in American cities

was compounded by the open hostility of the predominantly Anglo-Saxon Protestant natives. The representatives of the old stock viewed the coming of the Irish in much the same way as the Romans viewed the presence of the Visigoths: as an invasion by barbaric hordes. One such gentleman, George Templeton Strong, unloosed his venom in his diary: "I am sorry to find that England is right about the lower class of Irish. They are brutal, base, cruel, cowards, and as insolent as base. . . . My own theory is that St. Patrick's campaign against the snakes is a Popish delusion. They perished of biting the Irish people."[21] To the natives, it must have seemed that they awoke one fine morning to find their pleasant, mostly homogeneous, cities blighted by hideous slums and awash with thousands of loud and ill-mannered immigrants who had too great a fondness for the closed hand and the opened bottle.

The Irish were opposed not only because they disturbed the natives' sense of social decorum, but also because they offered a far more serious threat to their pocketbooks. In 1868, for example, the Chicago Post lamented, "Scratch a convict or pauper, and the chances are that you tickle the skin of an Irish Catholic."[22] In fact, the high percentage of Irish in jails, asylums, and alms houses placed a severe strain on charitable organizations and state facilities. Oscar Handlin discovered that in Boston, expenditures for poor relief nearly quadrupled in the two decades from 1840-1860, from $43,000 to $168,000.[23]

The well-heeled urbanite might well mutter mild

cautionary oaths and click his teeth in disapproval of the escalating tax rates, but the increased municipal levies were more than cancelled out by the advantages of having a huge new pool of cheap labor to man his factories and businesses. On the other hand, the native working classes, who often competed directly with the immigrants for jobs, were especially, and on occasion, violently, resentful. Not only were the higher taxes a severe hardship, but their already precarious wages were threatened by immigrants who worked for next to nothing.

If the Irish threatened the established social and economic order in America's cities, they posed a serious challenge to their religious life as well . Antipathy towards Catholicism was not, of course, a new phenomenon in the predominantly Anglo-Saxon, Protestant United States, but it gained new vigor in the early decades of the nineteenth century with the disturbing presence of thousands of Irish Catholic immigrants. Although anti-Catholicism was inextricably linked with native Americans' political and socio-economic opposition to the Irish, it will be treated separately in a later chapter.

By mid-century, the Irish Catholic immigrants found themselves confronted by innumerable, almost overwhelming, obstacles. Their own lack of skills, illiteracy, and abject poverty, plus the host society's racial and religious prejudice, seemed to condemn the Irish to wallow helplessly in their decaying urban slums. Success within the Catholic Church was always an acceptable, even honored way out of the

ghetto, but the traditional avenues of upward mobility in the secular world appeared to be tightly sealed off. America seemed just as much the oppressive monolith for the Irish as England had been back in the homeland.

Fortunately, however, American society and the American system of government were so loosely constructed that the Irish soon found a seam in the monolith. That seam, of course, was the political process. The Irish discovered that political conditions in America's dynamic and growing cities offered them an open avenue to power. William Shannon comments on the favorable urban political situation which greeted the Irish in the mid-nineteenth century:

> America was entering the democratic age. The abolition of property qualifications for voting meant the laboring class could participate fully in elections. Politics shifted to a popular, mass basis. Open conventions replaced the old caucus system for selecting candidates. The politician who could make a direct bid to the sentiments of the voters superseded the parliamentary orator and the aristocratic wirepuller. For the first time, public opinion in the modern sense became important. New techniques evolved to organize mass sentiments and rally voters to political causes. Street fighting, election day riots, political parades, and monster mass meetings became common. The process was rough and crude, but it broke fresh ground for democracy.[24]

The Irish were fortunate indeed to arrive when the cities were expanding and when the political situation was becoming more open and flexible as a result of the surge of democratic, popular government.

None of these developments would have mattered, however, had the Irish not arrived in America equipped to

exploit the situation. The Irish possessed several important advantages upon their arrival. First, and perhaps most crucial, they spoke English, the only major immigrant group to do so. Important, too, was their familiarity with Anglo-Saxon legal and political customs. The Irish also possessed an active political tradition and a political ethos which were peculiarly suited to the demands of the urban political situation. Even their clannishness, a drawback in virtually every other way, proved to be beneficial to the Irish in their assault on the political system. Through their ever-increasing numbers and their staunch solidarity, the Irish comprised a solid bloc of votes that was frequently enough to overcome the many factions that opposed them.

Equipped with these advantages, the Irish needed only to find an instrument within which to exercise them. From the very beginning, that instrument was the Democratic Party. Irish affiliation with the Democratic Party began as a reaction to the passage of the Alien and Sedition Acts in 1798 by the Federalists, who wished to exclude French and Irish radicals from entering the country. The Whigs, who succeeded the Federalists, and who were made up of the same mercantile and professional element, also feared and despised the Irish. The Whigs even went so far as to flirt with the Know Nothing Movement in the 1850s. The Democratic Party, on the other hand, was the party of Jackson and the "common man" and, while the Democrats did not eagerly embrace the Irish at first, they soon recognized the political potential of the huge mass of immigrant votes and began actively to cultivate

them. The Irish and the Democrats found that each could prove useful to the other, and so a marriage of convenience was born. That union eventually grew so strong that to be an Irish Catholic in nineteenth-century America was to be virtually assured that one was also a Democrat. James M. Curley once said of his opponent, "Hart was a worthy citizen, but he was a renegade Irishman. He was a Republican."[25]

At first, the Irish filtered into the urban Democratic Party organization at its lowest levels. They were the foot soldiers of the party and performed the menial but necessary tasks of block, neighborhood, and ward politics. And they regularly provided the votes for the native Americans who dominated the upper levels of the party organization. As their numbers increased, however, especially after the famine years of 1845-1847, the Irish began to recognize the leverage they wielded and demanded more power within the party. To placate the Irish, and to maintain a firm hold on the huge pool of Irish votes, the party hierarchy slowly opened its doors wider. An Irishman of exceptional ability or one who commanded a large following was occasionally nominated for an elective post. Depending on local conditions, this development occurred with varying speed. In New York City, for example, an Irishman was elected District Attorney in Manhattan as early as 1850, and within two years, eighteen more were elected to different statewide offices.[26] As Robert H. Lord notes, however, the pace was somewhat slower in Boston: "The first Catholic member of the Common Council was elected in 1857, the first alderman in 1870, and the

first representative in Congress in 1882."[27] Once the doors had been opened to the Irish, they were quick to seize the opportunity.

Before the Civil War, those Irish who rose to high office in municipal government were usually well-to-do men of exceptional character who had become leading citizens. They were not true representatives of the rank and file Irish, most of whom still dwelled in misery in the ghettoes. Instead, they moved in rarefied circles alongside their native American confreres. After the Civil War, however, the working-class Irish from the wards and neighborhoods began to capture increasingly higher positions in the party organization. According to Ralph Martin, such men rose to power solely on the basis of their ability to command a certain number of votes on election day: "The more votes he could collect and deliver, the more marketable the commodity of his political future."[28] Usually labor chiefs, saloon-keepers, gang leaders, or fraternal organization bigwigs, these Irishmen would develop a local following and then bargain with the powers-that-be in the party to supply their block of supporters on election day in return for more secure jobs for their adherents and graft opportunities for themselves. As the local leader gained more supporters, he would move up in the local party hierarchy, eventually supplanting a native American as ward boss.

This process was repeated over and over in cities throughout the Northeast until the Irish were in command of most urban wards. The ward boss operated in the absence of

any social welfare agency and was the mediator between the law and the immigrant. He was a familiar and accessible figure in the ward, and, according to Arthur Mann, his personalized rule simulated that of the local chieftain of the homeland: "The immigrants brought from their peasant villages the conception that politics was a personal affair; government was vested in the powerful local ruler who could help or hurt you."[29] He provided the essential services that the poor, unskilled immigrant so desperately needed and that the municipal government was unable to provide. The boss was always there whenever a crisis arose, ready to help secure a job, post bail, make a small loan, or even bury the dead. In return for his services, the boss asked just one simple thing: votes on election day.

Once the boss had consolidated his hold on the ward and demonstrated his power to the higher-ups in the party, he acquired greater access to patronage appointments, which he naturally filled with his fellow Irishmen. As Shannon notes, "Since Irish politicians were of working class origin, they entered public office trailing long strings of needy relatives. Because the public payroll was the politician's only resource, he was expected to use it to succor his family and dependents."[30] Thus, the Irish began to appear in ever greater numbers in municipal offices and agencies, and on the rolls of the police and fire departments. The ghetto Irish cherished such civil service jobs because of the security they provided. The loyalty of the boss was frequently rewarded by the appointee with votes and sometimes tithes to

the party's war chest.

The surge of Irish political power from beneath eventually supplanted the native Americans at the top of the party hierarchy. The step-by-step climb from the ghetto to municipal power was now complete. Once in charge, the Irish organized and refined the party structure into a smoothly operating machine, with a citywide leader or boss at the head, individual ward bosses in the middle, and precinct captains, ward heelers, and constituents bringing up the rear. The party machine formed what Shannon has called a "parallel system of government."[31] In essence, the machine performed the same services on a city-wide basis that the ward boss performed within his own district.

Once in power, the machine's sole objective was to stay in power by ensuring the reliability of sufficient votes. There were four principal ways in which this was done. Perhaps the most important was to secure the loyalty of its natural constituency, the working class poor, both Irish and otherwise, by providing them with the services necessary for their survival. Martin Lomasney, a Boston ward boss, described the machine's function and that of its ward representatives succinctly: "I think there has got to be in every ward a guy that any bloke can go to when he's in trouble and get help -- not justice and the law, but help, no matter what he's done."[32] The machine could continue to function and maintain its power as long as it could continue to provide the voters with what they needed.

The machine also retained sway over urban government by

controlling nominations for elective office and appointments to city agencies. In both cases, the potential candidate or job seeker was often expected to pay the machine for the privilege of securing his desired post. According to Martin, the price varied depending on the desired job: $15,000 for a judgeship and $4000 for a congressional nomination. The office of alderman was a bargain at only $600.[33] The highest bidder received the nod and was usually installed immediately thereafter. Once in his job, he was expected to remain loyal to the wishes of the organization, frequently being no more than a puppet of the big boss. Thus were the city offices, legislative bodies, and the courts staffed by men who would intercede, legislate, forewarn, and fix on behalf of the party. Any man who tended to display an independence of mind was assured of being removed or defeated in the next election.

If an election were in doubt, or if the party needed, for whatever reason, a large majority, the machine possessed the capacity for rigging the contest. There were any number of ways this could be done, given the shoddy manner in which elections were administered at the time. The machine itself often drew up the ballots, staffed both the election board and the polling booths, and counted the votes. Whoever the party wanted to win would win. When the machine could not exercise such control -- if for example a reform government or renegade Democrat was in power -- the party simply roused the troops, who bought votes, intimidated or beat up enemy voters, and then cast their own ballots -- repeatedly.

Repeat voting was so prevalent in New York City in 1868 that the total vote cast numbered eight percent more than the total number of potential voters.[34] Some Irishmen were so loyal to the party that they continued to cast their ballots from beyond the grave.

Graft was another necessary lubricant in the high performance machine. The boss needed a constant flow of cash in order to provide the vast array of services to his constituents. As Harold Zink notes, "Most bosses handle large sums of money. However, to successfully support a political machine requires the expenditure of huge sums, and some bosses have found this a large drain upon their personal means".[35] To supplement their own rather meagre, legitimate incomes, the bosses resorted to graft to maintain their services and, of course, their power. George Washington Plunkett, Tammany Hall leader of the Fifteenth Assembly District, spoke candidly of the two principal categories of graft open to men in his position. The first he labeled "dishonest graft," which involved either selling police protection to criminals or outright stealing from the public till. Plunkitt denounced dishonest grafters as fools because "with the grand opportunities all around for the man with a political pull, there's no excuse for stealin' a cent." These "grand opportunities" were what Plunkitt called "honest graft," upon which the boss himself elaborated:

> Supposin' it's a new bridge they're goin' to build. I get tipped off and I buy as much property as I can that has to be taken for approaches. I sell at my own price later on and drop some more money in the bank.[36]

Tammany must have built a great many bridges during Plunkitt's reign; he died a millionaire.

The prevalence of graft in Irish machine politics was born of poverty and powerlessness. In his study of twenty city bosses, Zink discovered that most of these men came from impoverished backgrounds, had little formal education, and had lost their fathers at an early age. Given these circumstances, and the powerful ambition of such men, politics was the best avenue to status and wealth.[37] In The Last Hurrah, Frank Skeffington explains his career choice to his nephew: "I had no education to speak of, a good many roads were closed to our people, and politics seemed to be the easiest way out."[38] Unfortunately, as Shannon notes, "A politician with this psychological background was obviously more vulnerable to the temptations to dishonesty in office than one who enjoyed a more secure and orderly transition through adolescence into adulthood."[39] For an Irishman on the make, then, politics became merely a business from which he expected a profit. Public service was often subordinated to personal aggrandizement.

Machines such as Tammany and bosses such as "Hinky Dink" Kenna and Ed Kelly of Chicago, Frank Hague of Jersey City, Charles Murphy and "Big Tim" Sullivan of New York, Tom Pendergast of Kansas City, and James Michael Curley of Boston came into power for a variety of reasons: the extension of the franchise during the Age of Jackson, the massive influx of indigent male immigrants able to exercise that franchise, the rapid growth of the cities which expanded graft

opportunities, the abdication of responsibility for urban affairs by the native elite, and the apathy of the electorate. While these factors were all important, perhaps the key component in the rise of the machine was what Robert K. Merton has labeled its "latent functions." The basic premise of Merton's theory is that the "functional deficiencies of the official structure [municipal government] generate an alternative unofficial structure [the machine] to fulfill existing needs somewhat more effectively."[40] The machine met the social needs of its Irish clients by "humanizing and personalizing all manner of assistance," and it satisfied its adherents' economic needs by "providing avenues of social mobility" for the poor and by rationalizing relations between business interests and city hall.[41] The machine arose and continued to thrive, in short, because it performed a variety of services that municipal governments were unable and, to some extent, unwilling to provide. Merton's functional analysis offers a useful corrective to the inveterately pejorative connotations of the words machine and boss.

To say that the boss system could occasionally present a benign mien, however, ameliorates only slightly the overwhelmingly negative moral judgement that history has deservedly levied upon it and upon many of the Irish who practiced it. Put simply, Irish machine politics failed on the whole to provide good government and failed to elevate, if indeed it did not lower, the standard of political conduct. Daniel Patrick Moynihan comments on his forebears'

conspicuous shortcomings: "In all the sixty or seventy years in which they could have done almost anything they wanted in politics, they did very little. Of all those candidates and all those campaigns, what remains? The names of two or three men." "The Irish," Moynihan continued, "just didn't know what to do with their opportunity."[42]

The Irish failed to seize their main chance because of the ineradicable impact of their own terrible history. The very political ethos that they developed to cope with English oppression and that later led to success in urban government prevented them from using that success wisely. The Irish, for example, pursued political power with such a single-minded avidity that it became for them, not an instrument of social change, but an end in itself. As Shannon notes, "The whole idea that one would lose an election for the sake of an abstract principle is alien to this Irish tradition."[43] The emphasis they placed on the personal concept of government was also harmful because neglected in the rush for favors based on personal allegiance were the issues. Irishmen of this era would probably have greeted President Kennedy's exhortation to "ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country" with a cynical, knowing wink. Even the Irish talent for organization and loyalty proved in the long run to be a drawback. Instead of taking care of the government, they took care of themselves. And finally, of course, their tolerance of corruption produced inefficiency, waste, and divisiveness.

Despite the persistent whiff of scandal and the wanton

prodigality associated with boss politics, the machines churned vigorously away well into the twentieth century. Beginning in the 1930s, however, the machines started to show serious signs of wear. Tammany Hall, for example, "the oldest political organization on earth" and the model for machine politics, suffered a precipitous decline from power in New York City, finally going bankrupt in 1943. And the Pendergast machine in Kansas City was dealt a mortal blow when its boss was sent to jail for tax evasion in 1939. In the next twenty years, virtually every famous boss active during the Depression years was removed from the stage. Pendergast died in 1945, Fiorello LaGuardia in 1947, Ed Kelly in 1950, Edward Flynn in 1953, Edward Crump in 1954, Frank Hague in 1956, and James Michael Curley in 1958. When they were gone, the machines they headed, some already in disrepair, crumbled. Only Kelly's Chicago survived the onslaught intact.

The rapid disappearance of so many bosses so shortly after FDR's New Deal suggested two things: that the era of the boss was over, and that FDR and the welfare state were responsible. Edwin O'Connor's enormously popular novel <u>The Last Hurrah</u> played a major role in giving widespread currency to these views, especially the latter. When Frank Skeffington is defeated at the end of the novel, his nephew Adam asks a politically active friend to explain this completely unforeseen and seemingly inexplicable occurrence. The friend tells the astonished Adam that it was Roosevelt who destroyed Skeffington:

> The old boss held all the cards. If anybody wanted anything -- jobs, favors, cash -- he could only go to the boss, the local leader. What Roosevelt did was to take the handouts out of the local hands. A few little things like Social Security, Unemployment Insurance, and the like -- that's what shifted the gears, sport. No need now to depend on the boss for everything; the Federal Government was getting into the act. Otherwise known as a social revolution.[44]

The plausibility of O'Connor's explanation was such that almost every subsequent historical work on the subject, whether pro or con, used what has become known as "The Last Hurrah Thesis" as its starting point. In fact, Bruce Stave's study of municipal politics in Pittsburgh is entitled The New Deal and the Last Hurrah.[45]

Recent historical research (including Stave's book), however, has tended to disprove the validity of O'Connor's thesis. These studies show that Roosevelt viewed the urban machines and their bosses with a ruthlessly expedient eye. He tried to destroy those that either opposed him or could not deliver votes for him (such as Pendergast, Curley, and Tammany), and to aid those that supported and helped him (such as Kelly, Crump, Hague, Flynn, and LaGuardia). In either case, the two principal weapons at FDR's disposal were patronage jobs in such programs as the PWA, WPA, and CWA, and millions in direct relief monies. Those bosses who earned Roosevelt's favor were rewarded with a flood of federal money and jobs; those whom FDR viewed as political liabilities found themselves cut off, the plums going instead to a promising rival who then used them to destroy the boss.

James Michael Curley and Edward Kelly should suffice as

illustrations of FDR's power to make or break a boss. Although Curley was one of the first bosses to declare for Roosevelt in 1932, he failed miserably to wean Massachusetts Democrats away from Al Smith, and FDR was badly beaten. Thereafter, he doubted Curley's usefulness. Besides that, he found the man himself a dangerous, because potentially embarrassing, ally. When FDR was elected, therefore, he attempted to destroy Curley. According to Lyle Dorsett, the President was quite successful: "By breaking off communications between Curley and the White House, and by refusing to supply money or jobs, he allowed the colorful Irishman to wither on the vine."[46] When Curley was bypassed by FDR, voters sensed the animosity between them and looked to support a man who had the president's favor.

Edward Kelly, who succeeded Anton Cermak as boss of Chicago's Democratic machine, was one such man. He enjoyed Roosevelt's genuine affection and could deliver the votes when called upon. It was, in fact, Kelly who engineered FDR's renomination for an unprecedented third term in 1940. Because he was reliable and had a progressive record as mayor, Kelly was profusely rewarded by FDR. According to Dorsett, the White House showered the major with WPA patronage "which ran between 180,000 and 200,000 jobs per year. Besides that, Chicago received millions of dollars in direct relief."[47] Such lavish attention ensured that Kelly's machine would continue to prosper. Richard J. Daley would have undoubtedly concurred.

The case of Daley in Chicago, and to a lesser extent

Bailey in Connecticut and DeSapio in New York, provides another argument against the O'Connor thesis. Obviously, the boss and his machine have not disappeared altogether, albeit their presence today is more remarkable than not. If the New Deal had weaned indigent support away from the machine, how explain the continuing clout of Chicago's organization? The answer lies in the fact that machines cannot depend solely on the support of the poor and ethnic minorities for their existence. As Dorsett asserts, "If we examine the political process we find that all the bosses had something quite fundamental in common: their power depended on serving a wide spectrum of interest groups. Every city embraced numerous groups with interests to protect and goals to attain, and every successful boss had to satisfy the needs and desires of enough interest groups to acquire and maintain power."[48] According to Milton Rakove, the Chicago machine has managed to survive not only by serving the poor, which now includes Blacks and Latins, but also by providing "significant social and economic rewards to the powerful interest groups in the city."[49]

Despite the Chicago machine's persistence, the Irish boss and his style of government is an anachronism today. Numerous factors helped push the Irish off center stage in America's cities: the cut-off of large scale immigration, postwar prosperity, the abatement of discrimination which resulted in increased educational and career opportunities, the subsequent dispersion to suburbia, the diminution over time of traditional, sentimental loyalties, the rise of

powerful labor unions, the voter's insistence that what were once called favors now be called rights, and the increasing demands and complexity of municipal government. None of these developments was conclusive in itself, but together they were enough to deal the machines a crippling blow. The rewards of assimilation for the Irish made politics less attractive, less a necessity.

Although Irish participation in and influence on American politics declined after the Roosevelt years, they did not entirely disappear. Instead, the Irish entered a period of transition which is perhaps best exemplified by the first Irish Catholic to be elected President of the United States.

The election of John F. Kennedy to the presidency in 1960 was a watershed event for America's Irish. Kennedy's victory showed how far the nation had come since Al Smith's bitter defeat in 1928 in living up to its ideals, and also how far the Irish had progressed in their pursuit of the American Dream. Over a century of struggle was successfully concluded and the aspirations of millions of Irish were vicariously fulfilled in the triumphant glow of 1960.

Kennedy himself was a pivotal figure in the history of Irish-American politics. His career symbolized both the culmination of an old style in Irish politics and the beginning of a new one. He combined, in Moynihan's words, "the tribal vigor of ward politics with the deft perceptions of the chancelleries."[50] Although Kennedy's political roots can be traced back to the machine politics of an earlier

generation (both his grandfathers, for example, were ward bosses), he transcended the limitations of that heritage and helped usher in a new generation of more polished and expansive Irish politicians.

Like Kennedy, this new breed of Irish politician, men such as Tunney, Brown, Dodd, and Buckley, emerged from backgrounds marked by wealth, privilege, and access to the finest schools. Unlike their predecessors, they are less parochial, less colorful, and markedly less Irish. Their success testifies to the consummation of the assimilative process.

Recent demographic studies, including the election returns from 1960, also suggest the degree to which the Irish have become Americanized. These studies show, for example, that today nearly fifty percent of the Irish belong to the middle class, that more Irish live in the suburbs than in cities, and that most have at least a high school diploma.[51] With this rise in status and income has come a corresponding attenuation of Irish loyalty to the Democratic Party. Father Andrew Greeley found that thirty percent of the Irish college graduates identify themselves as Republicans.[52] This development was reflected in the 1960 election returns. Kennedy received only seventy-five percent of the Irish vote, a figure actually less than that accorded to Lyndon Johnson in 1964.

These figures reveal that the seemingly immutable trinity of Irish, Catholic, and Democrat -- a trinity that helped preserve the Irish sense of solidarity and ethnic identity -- has been severely shaken. The attrition of Irish

allegiance to the Democratic Party suggests a corresponding attrition in their sense of ethnic distinctiveness. In their quest for respectability, the Irish have shed their "Irishness" in favor of a more comfortable American identity. In his fiction, Edwin O'Connor charts this changing world of Irish politics and thereby illuminates the difficult process of Irish acculturation.

ENDNOTES

[1]William V. Shannon, The American Irish (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 3. I am indebted to this work for the basic historical data in this section of the paper.

[2]Shannon, p. 3.

[3]Shannon, p. 4.

[4]George Macaulay Trevelyan, History of England, 3rd ed. (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1945), p. 206.

[5]Goldwin Smith, A History of England, 4th ed. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1974), p. 218.

[6]J. C. Beckett, A Short History of Ireland (London: Hutchinson's University Library, 1952), p. 44.

[7]George Potter, To the Golden Door (Boston: Little, Brown, 1960), p. 19.

[8]Shannon, p. 4.

[9]Shannon, p. 5.

[10]Potter, p. 3.

[11]Shannon, p. 5.

[12]Alexander M. Sullivan, New Ireland (London: Low, Marston, Searle, and Rivington, 1878), p. 79.

[13]Edward M. Levine, The Irish and Irish Politicians (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1966), p. 19.

[14]Potter, p. 67.

[15]Shannon, p. 11.

[16]Levine, p. 35.

[17]Potter, p. 58.

[18]Lawrence McCaffrey, The Irish Diaspora in America (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976), p. 40.

[19]Oscar Handlin, Boston's Immigrants (1941; rpt. New York: Atheneum, 1975), p. 51.

[20]Edward Wakin, Enter the Irish-American (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), p. 45.

[21]The Diary of George Templeton Strong, ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, (New York: Macmillan, 1952), III, 342-343.

[22]Chicago Post, 9 Sept. 1868, as quoted in Edward Wakin, Enter the Irish-American (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), p. 4.

[23]Handlin, p. 240.

[24]Shannon, pp. 51-52.

[25]James Michael Curley, I'd Do It Again (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1957), p. 44.

[26]Shannon, p. 50.

[27]Robert H. Lord, John E. Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington, History of the Archdiocese of Boston (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1944), III, 86.

[28]Ralph Martin, The Bosses (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), p. 22.

[29]Arthur Mann, "Introduction," Plunkitt of Tammany Hall, ed. William L. Riordan (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963), p. xvi.

[30]Shannon, p. 64.

[31]Shannon, p. 62.

[32]The Autobiography of Lincoln Steffens (Chautauqua, New York: Chautauqua Press, 1931), p. 618.

[33]Martin, p. 31.

[34]Martin, p. 24.

[35]Harold Zink, City Bosses in the United States (Durham: Duke University Press, 1930), pp. 36-37.

[36]George Washington Plunkitt, as quoted in William L. Riordan, ed., Plunkitt of Tammany Hall (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963), p. 4.

[37]Shannon, p. 64.

[38]Edwin O'Connor, The Last Hurrah (New York: Bantam, 1956), p. 62.

[39]Shannon, p. 66.

[20]Edward Wakin, Enter the Irish-American (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1976), p. 45.

[21]The Diary of George Templeton Strong, ed. Allan Nevins and Milton Halsey Thomas, (New York: Macmillan, 1952), III, 342-343.

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[23]Handlin, p. 240.

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[36]George Washington Plunkitt, as quoted in William L. Riordan, ed., Plunkitt of Tammany Hall (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1963), p. 4.

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[38]Edwin O'Connor, The Last Hurrah (New York: Bantam, 1956), p. 62.

[39]Shannon, p. 66.

[40]Robert K. Merton, "Latent Functions of the Machine," in American Urban History, ed. Alexander B. Callow, Jr. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 222.

[41]Merton, p. 225.

[42]Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Beyond the Melting Pot (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1963), p. 229.

[43]Shannon, p. 401.

[44]O'Connor, p. 330.

[45]Bruce Stave, The New Deal and The Last Hurrah (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1970).

[46]Lyle Dorsett, Franklin D. Roosevelt and the City Bosses (Port Washington, New York: Kennikat, 1977), p. 28.

[47]Dorsett, p. 91.

[48]Dorsett, p. 5.

[49]Milton Rakove, Don't Make No Waves . . . Don't Back No Losers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1975), p. 5.

[50]Glazer and Moynihan, p. 287.

[51]Mark R. Levy and Michael S. Kramer, The Ethnic Factor: How America's Minorities Decide Elections (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), pp. 124-125.

[52]As quoted in Levy and Kramer, p. 124.

CHAPTER III

THE BOSS AND THE NEW BREED

After the disappointing reception accorded his first novel (The Oracle, 1951), Edwin O'Connor decided to explore the Irish-American experience in his fiction. This decision was chiefly the result of a long-developing awareness of and interest in his own ethnicity. O'Connor noticed, however, that as he moved closer to his heritage, his fellow Irish were growing correspondingly more distant. In their relentless march from the ghettoes to the suburbs, the Irish were fast losing their Irishness. O'Connor was intrigued by this process and wanted to record the flavor and style of the earlier generations before they had become merely faint echoes from history; but he couldn't quite grasp the proper vehicle for the story. Finally, after several false starts, he realized that nothing was as important as politics in "the rise of his race" and that nowhere was the attenuation of what was distinctively Irish more readily apparent than in the political arena.[1]

Having decided that politics "would be the medium of my expression," O'Connor spent four years writing The Last Hurrah, a vibrant novel which recounts the final campaign of Mayor Frank Skeffington, one of the last of the old-style

Irish bosses.[2] He is both political and clan leader, the pragmatic problem solver and symbol of his people's rise from poverty and oppression to power and social acceptance. Through Skeffington, whom the author calls a "composite of all the old Irish-American political giants of the past," O'Connor delineates an important chapter in Irish political life: the personal motivations and socio-economic conditions which brought the boss to power, the political ethos and techniques that sustained him in power, and the sweeping changes that destroyed him.[3] Skeffington's political defeat and subsequent death at the end of the novel signal the passing of an era in both Irish-American politics and in Irish-American life.

O'Connor returned to the theme of the Irish in politics a decade later in All in the Family, which focuses on the political generation that succeeded Skeffington's. Set in the same city that Skeffington once ruled, the novel centers on Charles Kinsella, youngest son of a wealthy Irish family which attempts to dominate local politics. Kinsella is a representative of the new breed of Irish politician -- young, well educated, affluent, and urbane -- who emerged in the 1960s. In almost every respect save his ruthless quest for power, he is the antithesis of his notorious predecessor.

Together, The Last Hurrah and All in the Family constitute a continuous, interrelated saga in which O'Connor conveys the tumultuous evolution of Irish politics in twentieth-century America. Moreover, they reveal, at times poignantly, his major theme -- the death of Irish America.

Although the bulk of The Last Hurrah deals with Skeffington's final run for office sometime in the early 1950s, O'Connor provides the necessary background information to place his protagonist firmly in a historical context. Through Skeffington's anecdotes and reminiscences, O'Connor illuminates the personal motivations and historical conditions that helped to shape his political personality. The picture of the young Skeffington that O'Connor presents is remarkably consistent with the profile of the Irish boss given by Arthur Zink in his 1930 study.

Like many of his countrymen of that post-Civil War generation, Skeffington was a product of the poverty and squalor that marked the Irish slums of the major urban centers. Born around 1880 in the same city that he was eventually to rule, Skeffington was reared in a "small and shabby tenement" in an area "of old brick houses which had sadly declined from their genteel beginnings and swarmed with immigrant life."[4] His neighborhood was dotted with hundreds of "small saloons, each with its steady clientele of family men who converged upon it every night after dinner for the ritual of a quiet drink and conversation" (335). One of those "family men" was probably Skeffington's father, who later died when Frank was still a young boy, a not uncommon experience in Irish families of that era. Theodore Parker, in fact, commented in 1846 that he never saw "a gray-haired Irishman."[5]

Faced with the catastrophic loss of the principal breadwinner, the mother was often forced to provide for her

family alone until the children were old enough to work. Skeffington's mother met her family crisis by hiring herself out as a maid in the home of one of the city's older and wealthier Brahmins, Amos Force, Sr., owner of the city's major Republican newspaper. She was later summarily fired, however, because she was caught stealing food for her family, an old wound that Skeffington thinks is responsible for Amos Force, Jr.'s, continuing rabid opposition to him.

Fatherless and confronted by the bleak prospect of a future marked only by unending physical toil and indigence, the young Skeffington, with "no education to speak of," looked about for a way to rise in the world. The avenues leading to success for the ambitious Irish youth were severely restricted in that era, limited usually to the Church or politics. Skeffington, of course, chose politics. His reasons for so doing, he tells his nephew, were rather simple:

> I mentioned to you the other day that the reason I went into politics was because it was the quickest way out of the cellar and up the ladder. A good many others felt the same way. A lot of the younger men wanted a nice new dark serge suit that didn't necessarily come equipped with a chauffeur's cap. And the only way out was through politics; it was only when we gained a measure of political control that our people were able to come up for a little fresh air. . . . They think of it as the big salvation for them. (193)

Skeffington's reasons for entering the political arena are noteworthy because they typify the motives and expectations of the prospective Irish politician of the past. Politics was the bootstrap by which the individual Irishman of talent and ambition could pull himself into a position of wealth,

status, and of course, power, an especially compelling intoxicant for a long-suffering and prostrate people.

Once Skeffington had made his decision to enter politics, a traditional route to success, beginning with participation in party politics in the local ward, was already well established. After several years of dutifully performing menial chores, Skeffington had built up his own cadre of supporters and decided to test his strength against the reigning ward boss Charlie McCooey, "a fat man with a red face and handlebar mustache" (191). To the youthful Skeffington, McCooey "commanded respect and awe. I thought he must have been some kind of god" (191). When ambition finally overcame awe, however, Skeffington found that his idol had feet of clay: "I gave him the beating of his life in a fight for the leadership of the ward. . . . In the process of doing so, I discovered that the god was nothing more than a dull bully-boy with no imagination and just enough intelligence to read his way through the daily adventures of Happy Hooligan" (191). Perhaps McCooey's unexpected and crushing defeat at the hands of a relatively unknown upstart was an omen that Skeffington failed to heed.

The ward boss was usually distinguished by the narrowness of his concerns. He was content to focus only on the problems within his own ward, to play the role of backstage power broker. Occasionally, however, a ward boss with great ambition or talent (like James Michael Curley) would reach beyond his own baliwick and attempt to secure major public office. This was the road that Skeffington

took. His election as ward boss could only serve as a necessary stepping stone. His ultimate goal was the mayor's seat, which he captured shortly thereafter. He was the youngest mayor in the city's history. As he lies dying at the end of the novel, the nostalgic Skeffington recalls his triumphant election night torchlight parade:

> He led them down into his home ward where the people, massed on the sidewalks, in the streets, and at the tenement windows, cheered this new young champion in whom they had such hopes; he led them up Cooper's Hill and down the far side to the waterfront to the very piers where . . . the boatloads of wondering, impoverished immigrants had docked; then, turning, he led them back into the heart of the city, around City Hall, out into the Mall, and then, finally, to his goal: that handsome, quiet section where, in prudent elegance, lived the old inhabitants. Into the silent, empty well-kept streets poured the living torrent; around and through the quarter it circled its boiling boisterous way; and through the night and early morning hours, the victorious shout of "SKEFFINGTON!" rang out in loud defiance against the decorous window panes. The police were called; they did not come. In the houses there was anger and, on the part of some, a genuine fear: Were these the new Jacobins? (336)

As this raucous celebration so trenchantly conveys, Skeffington's election galvanized in the Irish a sense of racial pride mixed with a strong desire for racial revenge. Skeffington had clearly played on Irish resentment against the native ruling class in an effort to project himself into the role of spearcarrier of his race. As John Kenneth Galbraith notes, the oppression of the Irish "nurtured strong tribal loyalties and bred men of ability and guile. In the course of time, the minority became the majority, and it remained only for one of the men of ability and guile to mobilize the tribal loyalties and take over."[6] Through

Skeffington, the lowly Irish lived their dreams of power and status and in him saw "an idealized self-portrait of themselves."[7]

The stunning victory which catapulted him into the mayor's office was but the opening salvo in a forty-year war between Skeffington and his bitter foes, both Irish and Yankee, for control of city and state politics. He was not often denied. Three more times was he elected mayor of the city and twice governor of the state. As The Last Hurrah opens, Skeffington, now a spry seventy-two, is launching his fifth mayoral campaign. Through this campaign, which structures the novel, O'Connor explores the style and techniques of the Irish political boss.

One of the main ingredients in Skeffington's boss style of politics is his personal, paternalistic approach to government. Soon after Skeffington was elected mayor for the first time, he decided to crush the power of the ward bosses, a rather bold and unusual gambit for the typical Irish politician. Skeffington's decision to buck the party organization was not, however, inconsistent with the principles of bossism, for he was merely trying to ensconce himself as the city's sole boss. As O'Connor explains, Skeffington regarded the ward bosses as "superfluous, a quite unnecessary intermediary between the voters and himself. He was against the purposeless fragmentation of power, and his aim . . . had been essentially a simple one: that of eliminating the middle man" (39). Skeffington's assault on the party infrastructure meant that his political survival

depended solely on his ability to generate a bond of loyalty between himself and the voters. Like any Irish boss of his era, Skeffington established this bond by providing on a city-wide basis the same services, with the same degree of accessibility and personal concern, that the Irish were accustomed to receiving from the ward boss on the local level. As O'Connor notes, "Skeffington had built his political life upon such personal contact, carefully established and just as carefully preserved" (9).

Skeffington demonstrates his vast network of personal contacts in a variety of ways. For example, he maintains a voluminous correspondence with his constituents. In each letter, he relies on his excellent memory to strike just the right tone and degree of familiarity: "One had to remember the minute details that made all the difference: the salutation to old Miss Lothrop always to read 'My Dear Lady' rather than 'Dear Julia' . . . T. F. Casey always to be addressed 'Old Friend Tim'; the patriarch of the vast Esposito brood to be called 'Signor' . . . the favored diminutive of E. Myron Goldfarb to be spelled 'Myque' rather than 'Mike'" (9). Skeffington supplemented his correspondence by according his constituents the opportunity for a face-to-face audience. Each morning at 9:45, he granted personal interviews to any voter willing to wait in line in front of his house. As O'Connor notes, these voters usually needed something: "a job, a letter of introduction, medical care for an ailing wife, a low rent house, a pair of glasses, a transfer from one city department to another, a lawyer, a

hardship discharge for a son in the army, money" (12). No one was turned away, and few left dissatisfied.

Skeffington's style of campaigning also relies heavily on the personal appearance. Although he uses the electronic media as much as he can, and is skillful at it, Skeffington considers them "shortcuts to the electorate" (212). In fact, as his last campaign heats up, Skeffington embarks on a dizzying flurry of sorties into the sundry parts of the city. These forays suggest the ethnic diversity and multiplicity of special interests that must be taken into account in governing any large city. In addition, O'Connor indicates the enormously taxing physical demands that accrue to the old-style campaign. Adam, who accompanies his uncle on these whirlwind campaign stops, wonders in awe where the elderly mayor finds the stamina to continue. What the young man does not yet realize is that the sheer joy of political combat is Skeffington's lifeblood. As O'Connor states, "Much as he loved to win, he loved the fight even more" (36).

Adam gets his initiation to Skeffington's style of politics when his uncle invites him to Knocko Minihan's wake. Knocko, a widely unloved ne'er do well, happened to be married to one of Skeffington's oldest friends. Knowing that a small crowd is likely, Skeffington orders his men to attend and announces his intention to be there, realizing that his presence will swell the number of mourners and thus comfort the widow. Upon his arrival, the mayor plays the expected paternal role by bestowing $1,000 on the destitute Mrs. Minihan. Adam is somewhat chagrined later in the evening when

Skeffington and his cronies, apparently ignoring the solemn purpose of the occasion, gather together to talk politics. When Adam broaches the subject, Skeffington patiently explains that his position is complex because "I'm not just an elected official of the city; I'm a tribal chieftain as well. It's a necessary kind of dual officeholding, you might say; without the second, I wouldn't be the first" (190). The wake, he continues, is a "tribal custom" over which it is his duty to preside. The fact that the men discuss politics only indicates the importance it has played, and continues to play, in their lives. As ward leader and Skeffington advisor John Gorman so aptly tells Adam, "If you met the Pope you'd talk about religion" (170).

In contrast to Skeffington's personal style of campaigning, his opponent, Kevin McCluskey, relies almost exclusively on television. O'Connor portrays McCluskey as a vapid non-entity, a willing dupe of the powerful but unscrupulous men who back him. Because he is obtuse, McCluskey is advised by his media consultants to circumvent potentially embarrassing public exposure by conducting his campaign on television. In The Selling of the President 1968, Joe McGinnis confirms the wisdom of such a strategy: "Television seems particularly useful to the politician who can be charming but lacks ideas. . . . On television it matters less that he does not have ideas. His personality is what the viewers want to share."[8] The image created for McCluskey by his advisors is that of the dedicated family man and pious Catholic. In one TV spot, for example,

O'Connor describes McCluskey seated on his living room couch, beside his rented Irish setter and in front of a massive borrowed portrait of the Pope, answering prepared questions from an associate. The show reaches its climax with the entrance of the McCluskey children, the youngest of whom exposes her diapered bottom as she climbs atop her father's lap. Although O'Connor plays this scene mostly for laughs, he makes a serious point about the power of television to influence, if not revolutionize, the political process. Given that the novel was written during television's infancy, O'Connor was most astute about the new medium's uses and abuses.

Another important feature of Skeffington's political style is the sheer ruthlessness of his pursuit of power. Aside from his wife, now dead ten years, politics has been the only love in Skeffington's life. According to Gerald Haslam, he has an "almost obsessive desire for the rough and tumble life of politics and for the limelight and power his position gives him."[9] Because he is the consummate political animal, Skeffington trusts almost no one. Virtually all of his personal relationships are based on political calculation. When one of his longtime lieutenants is caught philandering, for example, Skeffington chastises him and then brusquely cuts him loose: "The man who's been running up and down the ward acting as my right hand suddenly winds up in the middle of a first-class scandal right before election day; how many votes do you think I'll lose just because people want to turn against you?" (208). Friendships can

endure for Skeffington only when they do not jeopardize votes on election day.

If people are shunted aside when votes are at stake, so too are the issues. At no time during the campaign does O'Connor show Skeffington outlining a platform, articulating his legislative goals, or calling for good government. As David Dillon asserts, "His interest is politics, not government, specifically the acquisition and consolidation of power. . . for personal partisan ends. . . . He has no municipal 'program' except the satisfaction of the immediate human needs . . . of his constituents."[10] The only public issue that Skeffington even remotely considers in the novel is a new housing project in John Gorman's ward; and the only reason he considers it is that he needs the votes that a satisfied Gorman will be sure to deliver. When the Yankee-dominated banking establishment refuses to grant the city a loan for the project, Skeffington singles out a particularly bitter enemy, Norman Cass, and concocts a devious blackmail scheme to get the money. In any question involving a choice between votes and ethics, Skeffington will invariably choose the votes.

Given Skeffington's propensity for unscrupulous behavior, it comes as no surprise that graft is also a component in his political success. Although O'Connor makes it clear that Skeffington does not profit personally, he leaves no doubt that the mayor employs graft to maintain his organization and his power. In the course of the novel, O'Connor reveals that Skeffington delivers building

contracts to favored construction companies in return for campaign contributions, provides the food and drink at Knocko's wake from a municipal hospital cafeteria, and demands that politically appointed city workers tithe a percentage of their salaries to his campaign coffers. While reminiscing on his deathbed, Skeffington himself admits that "along his road to glory there were those shabby markers which signalized his own dishonor: for he was not a guiltless man" (338).

The final element in Skeffington's political style is his showmanship. He is two parts superb politician and, as Ronald Dunleavy comments, one part "superior song and dance man."[11] His flair for entertainment is most obviously manifested in his speechmaking. As Dillon notes, "He has a vaudevillian's sense of timing and theatrical effects. . . . His complete mastery of the art of Irish political oratory is a unique blend of anecdote, hyperbole, erudition, and invective that can be as subtle as a sonnet or as blunt as a hammer blow."[12] Skeffington's flamboyance and lexical agility are not just entertaining; they are among the most effective political weapons in his arsenal. With the proper gesture or riposte, he can sidestep a dangerous issue, deflate an opponent, or charm a nonbeliever. To his friends, Skeffington is a lovable, diverting rogue, to his enemies, a sinister charlatan. In any event, Skeffington's is the longest running and most colorful act on the city's political stage.

Despite Skeffington's formidable political skills and

the mediocrity of the opposition, the curtain falls on him -- with thunderous finality. The landslide for McCluskey comes as a complete surprise and humiliation for Skeffington. Early on election night, he had reviewed the campaign and had predicted a "comfortable" victory. His organization had performed well, he had suffered no unexpected embarrassments, and above all, he had not allowed himself to become complacent. He had gone full throttle and then, to his utter disbelief, had been demolished. His most trusted aides see different reasons for the defeat. Sam Weinberg views it as a "betrayal," John Gorman as an "organizational breakdown." In his own mind, Skeffington dismisses these factors as inadequate: "He knew that neither singly nor in combination could they have occasioned his defeat. Undoubtedly, they had been there, but they had always been there and what had beaten him now was not something old, but something altogether new. What it might be, he simply did not know" (306).

Later in the novel, via the character of Jack Mangan, a liberal political activist, O'Connor offers his explanation of the demise of Boss Skeffington: FDR and the New Deal. As has been noted earlier, O'Connor's thesis is too simplistic and all-encompassing. City bosses thrived or declined in direct proportion to FDR's perception of them as assets or liabilities. In the individual case of Frank Skeffington, however, O'Connor's view may have some merit. Throughout the novel, Skeffington makes sarcastic allusions to "Franklin," which suggest that the two had been political

enemies and further that FDR had in some way betrayed the mayor. O'Connor does not specify the nature of their animus, but it is certainly possible that Roosevelt had by-passed Skeffington in dispensing control of federal relief monies and patronage jobs, a blow whose debilitating political effects may now have taken their toll.

Although O'Connor places primary emphasis on his New Deal theory to explain Skeffington's fall, he populates his novel with characters whose function is to represent the various segments of society and their relationship with the mayor. Through this cross-section of characters, most of whom oppose Skeffington, O'Connor suggests other important reasons for the demise of the old-style Irish boss. Amos Force, Jr., a newspaper publisher, and Norman Cass, an influential banker, for example, symbolize the old blue-blood elite -- those toppled from absolute power by the Irish surge from below. What they have in common is a hatred for Skeffington and the "shabby, tricky, ungrateful people" he represents. Their bond of contempt eventually overcomes their distaste for the sordid world of politics, and they unite with other powerful Skeffington opponents to form a coalition behind their puppet McCluskey. Skeffington has simply played the politics of racial revenge too long and has made too many fierce enemies to withstand easily such consolidated opposition. As Dillon comments, "Skeffington dwells too much on memories of ancient injustices done to his family and race and seems to take childish pleasure in harassing old enemies . . . as though the end of politics

were getting one's own back."[13] Instead of being a positive force in ameliorating the conflict between Irish and Yankee, Skeffington has exacerbated the hostility for personal political gain.

Anotner element dangerous to the continued reign of Boss Skeffington is the growing strength of newer ethnic minorities, in this case the Italians. For the most part, the Italians in the novel are still clients of the mayor's brand of "exchange" politics -- the eager recipients of favors in return for their votes. O'Connor suggests, however, that their turn in power is close on the horizon. Two of Skeffington's early opponents for mayor, for example, are Italian, as is the leader of the longshoreman's union. Much as the native Americans were forced to admit the Irish into the lower echelons of the party, only to be overthrown later, so must the Irish now accommodate the political aspirations of other ethnic groups, with the same inevitable result.

Skeffington is also vulnerable to defections from within the ranks of his own natural constituency, the Irish; and these are most crucial to his defeat. Skeffington's nephew Adam and his wife Maeve, for instance, are intended to portray the younger generations of Irish who have had no real contact with the mayor and who are, in large measure, apolitical. O'Connor suggests their political innocence through their names (Adam and Eve). At the beginning of the novel, Adam is vaguely suspicious of his uncle, whom he has not seen in many years, but grows to like and admire him as

he sees Skeffington in action. It is clear, however, that their mutual affection is mainly the result of Adam's need for a surrogate father (his died in a car crash) and Skeffington's need for a surrogate son (he calls his own a "featherhead").

Maeve, on the other hand, is the daughter of a rabid Skeffington hater named Roger Sugrue, and she unquestioningly adopts her father's every opinion. Even though Skeffington later meets and charms Maeve, her distrust of him is so deeply ingrained that she votes for McCluskey. Gordon Milne explains the estrangement of Maeve and, to a lesser extent, Adam as the result of a loosening of old emotional attachments: "The young Irish felt remote from the racial-spokesmen appeal, having been away from home, and subjected to different influences at Harvard or even at Boston College. Only the old and perhaps some of the middle-aged still shared with Skeffington the 'ould-sod' bond."[14] George Goodwin, Jr., feels that the young have ignored Skeffington's blandishments simply because they had no need for the kinds of services the mayor offered. Their improved economic status made them independent of the boss and his favors.[15]

Maeve's father represents those middle-aged, lace curtain Irish who have achieved success in America and now seek to distance themselves from any reminders of their scruffy forebears. Skeffington, of course, is the epitome of everything that Sugrue wishes to disassociate himself from. According to Sugrue, Skeffington has "let down his

inheritance, his people, and his religion" (19). Despite this rather grandiloquent condemnation, Sugrue also has a more personal animus against Skeffington which stems from his college years at Harvard. As O'Connor relates:

> He was proud of his alma mater, so proud, indeed, that he had almost forgotten his misery as an undergraduate: the poor Irish boy on the make, socially and financially ambitious, forever subject to handicaps of poverty and the fact of being a representative of a race which had produced the young usurper, Skeffington. There had been sneers, an almost perpetual chill; Roger had never forgiven Skeffington for them. (121)

It is Roger Sugrue who prompts from Skeffington the most famous line in the novel. As the mayor lies dying, Sugrue pompously remarks to the assembled mourners, "Knowing what he knows, if he had it to do all over again, there's not the slightest doubt that he'd do it all very, very differently" (353). Skeffington rouses slightly from his deathbed and, with his dying gasp, retorts, "The hell I would!" (353).

Another antagonist from the Irish camp is the Cardinal. In a series of conversations with his young aide, who finds Skeffington compelling, the Cardinal vents considerable fury on his political counterpart. He loathes Skeffington for his fiscal irresponsibility, his dishonesty, and his shamelessness in using the Church for his own purposes. The main source of the Cardinal's hatred, however, stems from his belief that Skeffington provided ammunition to those who would belittle the Irish and Catholicism. He tells his aide, "This man cheapened us forever at a time when we could have gained stature. I can never forgive him

for that!" (366). Although Skeffington has many friends among the clergy, the Cardinal represents a body of opposition among Irish Catholics who, like Sugrue, base their animosity on moral grounds.

Jack Mangan and Kevin McCluskey fill out the spectrum of Irish opposition to Skeffington. Mangan represents the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. Although he respects Skeffington's talents and has a sneaking admiration for him, Mangan is principally interested in good government. He feels that Skeffington has the knowledge and ability to improve municipal government but, as a result of age and long-standing commitments, will be content to maintain the status quo. Rather than deal with such an implacable anachronism, Mangan and his group decide to support McCluskey, who is at least open to suggestion.

The focus of the concerted opposition to Skeffington, and the man who finally slays the dragon, is Kevin McCluskey. Like Jack Mangan, McCluskey is a representative of the young, well-educated, liberal, middle-class Irish who sprouted to maturity after World War II. A veteran himself, McCluskey graduated from Holy Cross in 1940 and received his law degree from Georgetown in 1943. Unlike Skeffington, he seems concerned with issues and advocates a specific program "to reduce the tax rate, to lower the cost of municipal transportation, to settle the city's traffic problem, to the firemen and police more money, to enlarge municipal housing projects, and to put a new wing on the Public Library" (274).

Despite McCluskey's seemingly unassailable credentials, O'Connor depicts the candidate as nothing but facade. Beneath the handsome, sincere exterior, there lurks, as one of the characters in the novel puts it, "a mass of floating custard" (90). By depicting McCluskey as a brainless dupe, O'Connor is clearly suggesting that it was not a particular candidate who toppled Skeffington from power, but the changing times.

In many ways, according to Kate Simon, The Last Hurrah is a literary "wake for the passing of a gaudy dinosaur," and O'Connor provides the eulogy.[16] His assessment of the departed is decidedly mixed. He leaves little doubt that the legacy of Skeffington and his ilk is a tainted one, replete with waste, venality, vindictiveness, cynicism, and shoddy government. As the Cardinal noted, the Skeffingtons who ruled America's cities had an opportunity, through public displays of conciliation and private displays of probity, to enhance the image of the downtrodden and maligned Irish; instead, they let the opportunity slip through their fingers and in fact cheapened their countrymen. Moreover, the ill effects of their neglect and narrowness were persistent. O'Connor points to one such deleterious after-effect of the boss era: the rise of the McCluskeys. When the Cardinal, for example, disgustedly asks his aide if McCluskey is a representative product of the Catholic school system, if he is "the best we can do," the aide replies that the best of the young Irish no longer see politics as a fit career: "They feel that it's just inviting trouble to get involved in

a business that everyone seems to regard as being fairly shady" (259). The Cardinal ultimately prefers a McCluskey because he is honest and well intentioned, but he sadly realizes that, thanks to Skeffington, he is by no means the best that the Irish can offer.

Although O'Connor plainly recognizes the drawbacks of Skeffington's reign, his assessment is mitigated somewhat by his awareness of the tragic circumstances that produced such politicians -- poverty, discrimination, powerlessness. Brahmin financier and philanthropist Nathaniel Gardiner, whose views in the novel most closely resemble O'Connor's, explains to his sons that Skeffington's background must be considered before anyone can fully understand the man and his behavior:

> I know something about Skeffington's early life in this city; it wasn't very agreeable. He had a rather hard time of it, and so did his family and most other families like it; I'm afraid some of us didn't help matters much. And so, because Skeffington has an excellent memory, there was a certain amount of revenge. I don't say this to excuse his conduct. A bigger man and a better man would have acted differently. But unfortunately we're talking about Skeffington and the way <u>he</u> acted, and all I'm attempting to do is to show you why, to some extent, I sympathize with him (96).

O'Connor makes it clear in these remarks that while Skeffington's behavior must be judged against the wretched conditions of Irish immigrant life, these conditions do not "excuse" dishonesty. And, as John Kelleher notes, since the Irish constituted his main body of support, "the tragedy is collective, the failure of the Irish as a whole to have the courage of their own qualities and to make better use of

them."[17]

The second factor which mitigates O'Connor's negative judgement of Skeffington is his admiration for the energy, personality, passion, and style of such men and the era they helped to shape. Men such as Skeffington were, O'Connor insists, dynamic individuals whose wit, flamboyance, and "Irishness" left an indelible imprint on their times. For good or ill, Skeffington was a gigantic presence who loomed so far above his contemporaries that no mere mortal, only the passage of time, could diminish him. In contrast to Skeffington, the new era offers only McCluskey, a telegenic ninny whose Irishness and individuality have been burned away in the American melting pot. While Skeffington's funeral cortege passes, O'Connor sums up his feeling about the changing of the guard through Nathaniel Gardiner: "Where there had been a Skeffington, there was now a McCluskey. The old buccaneer, for all his faults, had at least been a capable, vivid, unforgettable personality; he had been succeeded by the spearhead of a generation of ciphers" (361).

Just as McCluskey made Skeffington appear outdated, however, there shortly appeared a new phenomenon on the Irish political scene -- what Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., calls "the Ivy-League Irish" -- that made even McCluskey seem anachronistic.[18] The sheer speed of what O'Connor called the "polishing process" had obviously accelerated beyond his expectations. To no one else perhaps could this acceleration be more starkly apparent than to a Bostonian like O'Connor, whose city was governed by James Michael Curley in 1949 and

whose nation was governed by John F. Kennedy only twelve years later. O'Connor was eager to explore this new direction in Irish-American politics and therefore began work on a new novel early in 1963. The result was All in the Family (1966).

O'Connor's last-published novel is, at least in terms of politics, a sequel to The Last Hurrah, a kind of follow-up report on the state of Irish-American political life in the early 1960s. The story is set in the same city that Skeffington once ruled, and the narrator, Jack Kinsella, is revealed to have been the mayor's last personal secretary. Skeffington, moreover, is a haunting presence in the novel; his name comes up so frequently in political discussions that a contrast between him and the new generation is obvious and inevitable.

The new generation is represented in the novel by the affluent, well-educated, and sophisticated Kinsella brothers, Charles and Phil, the former a politician and the latter his campaign manager, strategist, and conscience. Lawyers by trade, they are summoned to a family conference by their father, Jimmy Kinsella, an extremely wealthy businessman, who has decided that local politics needs to be radically reformed. The Kinsella family, he argues, has the talent and the responsibility to lead the way. The sons concur and, with the principle of good government in the forefront and Jimmy's money and connections in the background, Charles captures the mayoralty. Four years later, he is elected governor of the state. Once secure in the State House,

Charles is swallowed up by what Howard Mumford Jones calls "the soft corruption of ambition" for national office and abandons his reformist activism.[19] Phil realizes what is happening to his brother and tries to stop him. Charles counters by having Phil committed to a mental institution, thus shattering the Kinsella family forever. Although O'Connor's plot sounds rather melodramatic, he informs the story with incisive commentary on the changes that have occurred in the world of Irish-American politics and in Irish-American life in general.

The Kinsella brothers' personal and family histories are testaments to the triumph of acculturation. They are fourth-generation Irish-Americans. Their great grandfather emigrated to America and worked on the railroad gangs; their grandfather, a hard, miserly man, made a fortune in real estate and banking; their father expanded the family's financial operations and amassed fabulous wealth and considerable influence. He is known in business circles as the "Irish Baruch." Jimmy's three sons enjoyed the fruits of the family's success -- the best schools, extensive travel, and a healthy inheritance. The youngest son Charles became a well-regarded lawyer and member of the international jet set. Along the way, he married Marie Granowski, daughter of Polish immigrants. Phil, the middle son, and also a respected lawyer, married Flossie, descendant of wealthy Yankees and the only non-Catholic in the Kinsella clan. The eldest son, James, much to his father's dismay, had entered the seminary and become a world-renowned figure in the ecumenical

movement. The marriages of Charles and Phil to non-Irish, non-Catholic women, and James' involvement in ecumenism suggest the erosion of an inhibitive Irish insularity that had afflicted earlier generations. The world of these young, affluent Irish is no longer circumscribed by the narrow limits of neighborhood, city, or for that matter, race.

Charles' decision to enter politics is based on markedly different considerations than those of the older generation. For the uneducated Skeffington, politics was his only route to success, his consuming interest, indeed, his job. For Charles, politics is an avocation, not a vocation. Already wealthy and successful in his law practice, he turns to politics in much the same spirit of noblesse oblige, of disinterested public service, as the Protestant elite whom Skeffington had earlier out-muscled. Charles' zeal for reform and his interest in issues are also more reminiscent of the native bluebloods' political code that it is of the Irish ethos.

Charles' choice of a political career differs from Skeffington's in another key respect. Instead of working his way up the party ladder, building support as he goes, Charles begins his quest for political power at the top. One reason he is able to do so, O'Connor suggests, is his personal wealth and the access to television his money commands. As Theodore White notes, the combination of television and huge sums of money makes it possible for a candidate to bypass traditional power centers like the press and the party and transmit his appeal directly to the electorate.[20] Charles

employs this strategy and, in a relatively brief time, becomes a well-known, even familiar, figure in the living rooms of millions of voters.

Charles' easy access to television is doubly effective because he is a master of that medium. His cousin Jack, in fact, thinks that Charles' television appearances actually enhance his credibility:

> It was on television that Charles had come into his own. . . . It was as if he had recognized that this newest route to the public belonged to him in the same way that the torchlight parade had belonged to older and earlier men. He had used it well. He was photogenic; his speech . . . was curiously impressive on this intimate medium: it became almost imperative to believe that he believed whatever he was saying. (100)

In both The Last Hurrah and All in the Family, O'Connor accents the tremendous impact that television can have on the political process. In each case, however, he tends to view that impact as negative. The political manipulators use television, he warns, not to reveal the truth about a candidate, but to conceal it.

While money and television are important elements in Charles' meteoric rise to political prominence, the key factor, according to Phil, is that Charles "took the enormous trouble to know more about this state than anyone else who's ever been near the State House" (289). Prior to the election, the Kinsella organization had painstakingly compiled a complete file on every town, city, and political figure in the state. This information was then used by Charles to tailor his speeches to the needs of a particular locale, win over undecided voters, and neutralize, if not

eliminate, serious opposition. Phil later admits to Jack that in some cases the data were used in a manner that bordered on the unethical. In any event, knowledge proved to be the decisive factor in Charles' election.

Nowhere does O'Connor illuminate the changes in Irish-American politics and the contrast between Skeffington and Charles more clearly than in the victory parties of the two men. Skeffington's election night celebration is an all-Irish affair, a ritualistic gathering of the clan to pay homage to the tribal chieftain. The celebrants reaffirm their common heritage by singing the old Irish tunes and reliving through anecdotes the exploits of Father Fahey and Footsie McEntee, the most renowned repeat voter in the city's history. They are concerned with the future only to the extent of hoping that a Skeffington victory will ensure them a sinecure for another four years.

Charles' victory party stands in stark contrast to that of his notorious precursor. Those in attendance, for example, represent a broad spectrum that includes Blacks, Italians, Jews, intellectuals, and students. As Jack wanders through the packed ballroom, he notices that this motley crowd is not really a crowd at all: "It was instead a large grouping of independent knots; walking through them, I saw that . . . each knot had a life of its own and did not mix readily with its neighbor. They were adjacent islands, not a continent -- the tie was Charles and that was all" (113). The Irish, now merely one element of the heterogeneous coalition behind Charles, are represented by Edso Monahan and

Leo J. Walsh, ancient party loyalists who provide the only link to the past. The diverse composition of Charles' victory party suggests the degree to which the new breed of Irish politician must reach beyond his own ethnic group for support. He can no longer automatically expect a solid bloc of Irish votes on election day. It also suggests, as O'Connor predicted in The Last Hurrah, that the Irish have been forced aside to make room for the newer immigrants and ethnic minorities. Significant in this respect is the fact that Charles' opponent in his race for the State House was the incumbent Governor Consolo, an Italian Republican.

Not only has their political sun been eclipsed, but the Irish have become the main target of Charles and Phil's reformist impulse. As Phil explains to Jack, the principal task ahead of his brother is to clean out the "gang of shanty clowns" who strangle local government in a pervasive web of graft and nepotism. Throughout the novel, in fact, the various members of the Kinsella family dispense disparaging remarks about "cornball harps" and "mushmouthed micks." As Dillon notes, the younger generation "tend to regard the old people as quaint, semi-mythical creatures and to think of Irish history as a collection of legends without significance to the present." Like Roger Sugrue, "They look back only to be sure that the past is not about to embarrass them."[21] In addition, O'Connor suggests that the further away the new breed of Irish politicians move from their immigrant roots, the more they begin to take on the values and attitudes of the WASP elite, even to the extent of disparaging their own.

As the epitome of the old style of politics and as the hero of the "shanty-Irish," Skeffington is accorded the same haughty derision by the Ivy-League Irish. Uncle Jimmy, for instance, calls Skeffington "a local con man: every time he left town to monkey with the big boys they had to loan him carfare to get home" (139). Charles' assessment is somewhat less pejorative but still tinged with condescension. While he admires Skeffington's political acuity and downplays his venality (in view of the "standards of his time"), he brands him a "fiscal incompetent" who had "no financial sense at all. None" (158). When Jack asks how Skeffington would fare in the new era, Charles replies that he "wouldn't last five minutes" because today's politics "is a matter of style as much as anything else" (160). An important part of that style is to not appear too "Irish." Charles explains that "I got the Catholic vote because I am one. I got the non-Catholic vote because others don't think I'm a very good one" (162). He then cites the case of Frank Dooley, a once-promising aspirant to local political office who is doomed to failure because he reminds people of "an old-fashioned pol." As Charles puts it, "He starts out on the rights of the Negro to equal employment opportunity and then, before he can stop himself, a bit of the brogue creeps in, a 'God love you' slips out, and that kills him. He reminds people of yesterday" (160-161). Success in the new politics, according to Charles, requires that the candidate cleanse himself of his ethnicity.

As with McCluskey, O'Connor's ultimate assessment of the

new breed of Irish politician is mostly negative. While these men are sophisticated, well educated, and issue-oriented, they lack the passionate commitment that marked such men as Skeffington. While some of Skeffington's behavior was misguided and, in come cases, blatantly dishonest and exploitative, his friends and enemies alike knew where he stood. He cared for his own people and would put them first. Moreover, he was a real, identifiable personality, not some malleable dupe or elusive shadow on a television screen. Men such as Charles, however, emerge as traditionless, coldly manipulative, and committed only to themselves and their own ambition. Certainly, Charles' revenge on his brother is more icily ruthless than anything Skeffington did. Charles resembles Skeffington only in his zeal for power. As Dillon writes, "Irish-American politics has changed in style but not in substance. The vices of the old boys have been refined while their virtues have been lost."[22]

O'Connor is not entirely without hope for the future of Irish politics in America, however. His portrayal of Phil suggests that the new breed can indeed combine style with substance, can meld the best of the old with that of the new. Although Phil is defeated at the end of the novel, he achieves a moral victory that bodes well for the future of Irish-American political involvement and of the Irish-American community as a whole.

ENDNOTES

[1]James F. Leonard, "O'Connor Career Shaped by Priest," Boston Post, 14 Feb. 1956, Sec. 1, p. 13, col. 3.

[2]Leonard, Sec. 1, p. 13, col. 2.

[3]Leonard, Sec. 1, p. 13, col. 3.

[4]Edwin O'Connor, The Last Hurrah (New York: Bantam, 1956), pp. 334-335. All subsequent quotations from this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text by page number.

[5]Theodore Parker, as quoted in William V. Shannon, The American Irish (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 29.

[6]John Kenneth Galbraith, "Sadness in Boston," The New Yorker, 24 June 1961, p. 88.

[7]Kate Simon, "Hurrah for What?" The Nation, 25 Feb. 1956, p. 163.

[8]Joe McGinnis, The Selling of the President 1968 (New York: Pocket, 1970), p. 22.

[9]Gerald Haslam, "The Last Hurrah and American Bossism," Rendezvous, 8 (1973), 37.

[10]David Dillon, "Priests and Politicians: the Fiction of Edwin O'Connor," Critique, 16 (1974), 109.

[11]Ronald J. Dunleavy, "Last Year's Hurrah," The New Republic, 25 March 1957, p. 17.

[12]Dillon, pp. 109-110.

[13]Dillon, p. 112.

[14]Gordon Milne, The American Political Novel (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1966), p. 167.

[15]George Goodwin, Jr., "The Last Hurrahs: George Apley and Frank Skeffington," The Massachusetts Review, 1 (1960), 469.

[16]Simon, p. 162.

[17]John V. Kelleher, "The Hero as an Irish-American," The New York Times Book Review, 5 Feb. 1956, p. 1, col. 1.

[18]Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., ed., The Best and the Last of Edwin O'Connor (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 24.

[19]Howard Mumford Jones, "Politics, Mr. O'Connor, and the Family Novel," Atlantic Monthly, Oct. 1966, p. 117.

[20]Theodore H. White, Breach of Faith (New York: Dell, 1975), p. 57.

[21]Dillon, p. 113.

[22]Dillon, pp. 113-114.

CHAPTER IV

THE ANCHOR OF THE CHURCH

That Edwin O'Connor first chose politics as a vehicle to explore the changes occurring in the Irish-American community at mid-century surprised even his closest friends. They knew him as a man who was detached from and generally scornful of the local political scene. Though an outsider in the world of politics, O'Connor masterfully compensated by using his keen powers of observation and an active imagination. No one who knew O'Connor should have been surprised, however, when his second novel about the American Irish, The Edge of Sadness, focused on their religion. In this world, as his friends knew sometimes to their own discomfort, O'Connor was an insider, a practicing Catholic, and a deeply religious man. O'Connor's devotion to the Church represented on a personal level the affection that his fellow Irish as a group had developed for Catholicism. Indeed, the attachment of the Irish to the Catholic Church has been the most distinguishing feature of their cultural life in Ireland and later in the United States.

The two most serious problems that confronted the American Catholic Church -- and the Irish, for a long time the largest and most powerful element within that Church -- were

nativism and the immigration of millions of co-religionists from diverse ethnic backgrounds. Many of those who have written about Irish-American Catholics have naturally chosen to focus on that period from 1820 to 1920 when the interrelated problems of nativism and immigration were most intense. It was, after all, a dramatic era filled with violence and social upheaval. Although this era and its immense problems were outside O'Connor's immediate purview, he was astute enough to realize that they had left their mark on the twentieth-century Church and its Irish constituency.

The Irish reacted to the fury of the Protestant Crusade of the nineteenth century by retreating into the safety of tightly knit, self-sustaining communities, at the center of which was the parish church and its pastor, usually a man who commanded great respect and exercised vast influence. A large measure of the impetus for this retreat was provided by the American Catholic hierarchy, which was itself made up largely of Irishmen who shared the immigrants' fear and distrust of Protestant America. These communities were distinguished by the degree of their homogeneity and their insularity.

By the end of the nineteenth century, most of the parish-centered Irish neighborhoods had already begun to come apart. The dissipation of nativist hostility, increased educational and job opportunities, and a more enlightened hierarchy all helped to break down the walls of separation between the Irish and American society and, concomitantly, the intense bond of loyalty between the Irish and the parish

church. Perhaps equally important was the influx of millions of immigrant Catholics from Southern and Eastern Europe who invaded the Irish communities and gradually took them over. The Irish did not cede their territory willingly, and actively resented the alien newcomers and the changes their presence effected. The American hierarchy and the local parish priests also feared the new Catholic immigrants because they challenged established Irish power and sought concessions for their own respective ethnic groups. The immigrants themselves were no more enamored of the Irish who often treated them as second-class Catholics.

As the twentieth century wore on, the forces working to shatter the insular Irish communities accelerated while those working to preserve them waned. Only in places like New England, where the Irish constituted something close to a majority and where the homogeneity of the neighborhood population remained relatively constant, did such communities survive. By 1950, when O'Connor began writing about the American Irish, he recognized that even these lingering remnants of a bygone era were in the incipient stages of decay. He was not dismayed by such a prospect, however, for he realized that while these communities nurtured and protected the first and second generations, and could still serve that function, they had also by 1950 begun to show signs of internal strain. The comfortable relationship between the Irish priest and his flock had bred a hostility born of too great familiarity, a destructive stagnation and, worst of all, an ethnocentrism that rendered the priest

unwilling or incapable of ministering to those other than the Irish and condescending toward fellow priests from the newer ethnic groups.

As O'Connor so ably demonstrates in his fiction, the keys to understanding the present status of the American Irish lie in the past. The foundation for the strong bond between the Irish and the Catholic Church, however, can be traced back beyond the Irish experience in America to the sixteenth century.

When Henry VIII broke away from the Catholic Church over a marital dispute, his rebellion reverberated throughout Ireland's history like a cannon shot. The Irish had long been a political thorn in England's side. A proud, belligerent people, they had stubbornly refused to accept English dominion over them, even in the face of repeated military expeditions. They now refused to accept Henry's new religious order. The results were catastrophic. What had once been a festering political struggle between Ireland and England exploded into a ferocious religious war.

English monarchs had long recognized the Emerald Isle's strategic importance to their nation's security. After the Reformation, a hostile Ireland loomed as an even greater threat, given the possibility of an alliance between her and the Catholic giants of Spain and France. To ward off that dangerous prospect, London's rulers determined that Catholicism in Ireland must be destroyed. The penal codes of 1692-1727 are eloquent testimony to the draconian lengths to which the English were willing to go to eradicate the Church

in Ireland.

The net result of such measures, however, was the opposite of that which the English originally intended. Instead of weakening the bond between the Irish and Catholicism, oppression served only to strengthen it. Irish devotion to the Church was not so much centered on Rome, or the hierarchy in Ireland, but on the priest who served the local parish. It is not difficult to understand why the Irish peasants revered their priests. It was the priest who risked his life during the Penal Code era to celebrate Mass secretly, he who baptized their children, married their young, and buried their dead, he who shared their misery and never betrayed them. Gustave de Beaumont, a visitor to Ireland in the late eighteenth century, commented on the affection between the priest and his flock: "In Ireland the priest is the only person in perpetual relation with the people who is honoured by them."[1]

As the screws of oppression turned ever tighter around the Irish in the eighteenth century, priests became increasingly involved in secular affairs. Since the priest was the most respected and frequently the most highly educated member of the community, the peasants naturally turned to him for advice on matters unrelated to religion. In fact, the people received more than words of comfort; Irish priests were often in the front lines of numerous revolts that rocked the country in the eighteenth century. As Edward Levine notes, "When the Irish revolted in 1798, priests appeared as the leaders of the Irish peasants in their skirmishes and pitched

battles with the Protestants. Their authority as men of the Church and their personal involvement with their parishioners' hardships made them the natural leaders of various insurrectionary groups during those times."[2] Later, in the nineteenth century, Irish priests played a major role in organizing and operating the Catholic Association.

The priest's direct involvement in insurrections and political movements symbolized the absence of distinct borders separating politics and religion in Ireland. In fact, for the Irish on the eve of the famine immigration, Catholicism had become the quintessence of their identity as a people. Since religion was the single most important factor in their communal life, the Irish were determined that it would not be left behind as they braved steerage for America.

Unfortunately for the immigrants, their new life was in many respects indistinguishable from the old. Many Anglo-Saxon Protestants in America shared the same dim view of the Irish and their religion as did their forebears in England. They reacted to the steady stream of Irish and the ghastly urban slums that their presence created with howls of protest, reams of published vilification, and periodic outbursts of violent opposition. Plots and scandals were fabricated, working men and women were discriminated against, churches were razed, and nativist political parties were formed, all in the name of saving the country from Papist domination.[3] Instead of confronting the American environment, the Irish retreated into the safety of the parish community and created an insular subculture marked by

the strength of its Irish Catholic consciousness and unity.

A number of different forces combined to keep the Irish confined to their urban ghettoes. Certainly, the hostility and discrimination of the host society was crucial in this respect. Also important was the fact that the Irish did not have the tools required to break down the barriers confronting them. Most of the Irish, particularly in the post-famine years, came from the lowest stratum of Irish peasant life and thus were illiterate, unskilled, and impoverished. They were hard pressed to make the change from a rural agricultural society to one that was urban and technological. The final, and perhaps conclusive, segregative factor was Irish affiliation with the Catholic Church.

The Church in the mid-nineteenth century was a profoundly conservative institution. Since the French Revolution, a series of similar upheavals had rocked Europe, many of which took on anticlerical overtones and threatened to topple the established Church. Even the Papal State had come under serious attack. The Church, according to Andrew Greeley, reacted to this onslaught by "feeling acutely suspicious of the contemporary world and all its pomps and work. A narrow, suspicious, defensive, reactionary mentality was far more typical of the churchmen during these years than was the opposite."[4] If the Church could not recapture the glory of the past, then it was determined to preserve the status quo at all costs; thus, popular uprisings were condemned, their leaders excommunicated, and their reforms opposed. The Church seemed to be out of step with the spirit

of the age, if not in outright opposition.

A combative defensiveness and deep conservatism also marked the leadership of the Church in America at the midway point of the nineteenth century. This had not always been the case, however. The early hierarchy of the Church, headed by Bishop John Carroll, an Anglo-American from a highly respected family, and emigrè priests from France, was composed of cultivated men who moved with polished ease among their aristocratic confreres. While the number of Catholics in America at the turn of the nineteenth century was miniscule, such worthy men as Bishops Carroll and Cheverus enhanced the status and respectability of the Church and stabilized interfaith relations. The peaceful co-existence between Catholics and Protestants was shattered, however, by the flood of Irish immigrants and the stupendous growth of the Catholic Church.

As more and more Irish poured into America, the Catholic Church took on an increasingly Irish cast. Within a short time, parishes and chancellories alike were staffed by Irish clergymen. Most of these men were born in Ireland and, although certainly better educated, came from similar backgrounds and were subject to the same fears and resentments as the immigrants they served. When confronted by the virulence of nativist hostility, they tended to equate the situation in America with that in their native land: America, like England, was an unfriendly Protestant country which posed a serious danger to the faith of the Irish. The fact that the government was neither for nor against but

indifferent to religious practice was not consoling. Men such as Bishop Hughes of New York, the leading prelate of his day, and Bishop Fitzpatrick of Boston distrusted the unlettered immigrants' ability to become Americans and remain Catholics. Since America was a Protestant country, they reasoned, to become an American seemed the equivalent to becoming a Protestant. In an attempt to secure the protection of their faith, the hierarchy helped direct and sustain the isolation of the immigrants in such areas as place of settlement, religious observance, education, and social life. The result of such a segregationist policy was to reinforce the Irish people's, primarily religious cultural identity and solidarity.

The Church was instrumental in fostering the conditions under which a geographical cleavage between Protestant natives and Irish Catholics could flourish. The great majority of the Irish immigrants exhibited a remarkable tendency towards settling in the large metropolitan centers of America's eastern seaboard. Bishop John Lancaster Spalding provides some pertinent data on this phenomenon. He determined that of every one thousand inhabitants of Ireland, children excluded, 350 were engaged in the practice of agriculture. In America, however, the number of Irish immigrants engaged in farming dropped to eighty per every one thousand.[5] The immigrants' poverty, their need for jobs, and their disenchantment with the land were all important inducements to settling in the cities. Most compelling perhaps was the desire to take up residence within the comforting influence

of the parish church. Since most diocesan sees and churches were located in large urban centers, the Irish generally remained in the port of disembarkation.

Despite the horrifying slums that resulted from overcrowding, the hierarchy encouraged the Irish to remain. Theodore Maynard offers an explanation of this policy: "They [the hierarchy] were aware that thousands upon thousands of the Catholics who had come to these shores and had gone into the interior had lost their faith for no other reason than that not enough priests were available. It seemed better to herd the Catholic immigrants into the cities where they would find churches, and pastors and schools, whatever might be the evils of city life."[6] Although several of the more liberal prelates attempted to disperse the immigrants via colonization in the interior, these projects received little support and were generally ineffective.

Maynard goes on to suggest another, less exalted, reason why the hierarchy promoted urban settlement. The concentration of a large number of people in one area insured adequate funds for building churches, schools, and other church-related structures.[7] Church leaders at the time were interested in building projects, especially grandiose new churches with imposing facades, because they symbolized the power and importance of the Church to both the lowly immigrants and the hostile natives. The hierarchy was remarkably successful in its ambitious plans. In 1846, for instance, there were 48 Catholic churches in all of New England and, in 1866, there were 109 in Massachusetts alone.[8]

Once the Irish had settled into the urban ghettoes, the Church provided little incentive to escape. The hierarchy's ambitious building program, for example, created a constant drain on the immigrants' financial resources, since it was they who bore the financial burden. The Church also helped keep the Irish from breaking out of the ghetto by continually praising the true happiness of the poor and by denigrating the value of riches. Poverty and physical distress meant nothing so long as one attained his eternal reward. Orestes Brownson, a convert to Catholicism, perhaps best expressed the Church's views on the relative merits of poverty and wealth:

> The pious poor are the jewels of the Church: hardly shall the rich enter into the Kingdom of Heaven. Moreover, we believe the most abject of our poor have even in this world more solid enjoyment, more true happiness, than the rich and the great. We would relieve actual suffering wherever we find it, but we would not make the poor rich if we could, for we do not believe that increases of riches are ever desirable. This world is but an inn; we lodge in it but for a night, and what matter is the inconvenience which we may be required to put up with. If we gain Heaven it is nothing; and if we fail of Heaven, the memory of it will be lost in an infinitely greater calamity.[9]

This other-worldly philosophy preached by the Church no doubt helped the immigrant reconcile himself to his miserable surroundings and also helped stunt his desire to escape them.

The Catholic Church was influential in effecting not only a geographical cleavage but also a spiritual separation of Protestants and Irish Catholics. The conservative hierarchy of the day feared that any close interaction between Irish Catholics and Protestant American society would result

in widespread apostasy. They promulgated, therefore, a strict set of guidelines which urged Catholics not to attend Protestant churches, read books by Protestant clergymen, contribute to Protestant charities, or intermarry with Protestants. As John Cogley points out, the guidelines for priests were similarly strenuous: "Priests were required to avoid all but the most innocuous and determinedly 'social' interfaith meetings. They were usually turned down when they asked for permission to participate in public discussions with clergymen of other faiths, even when the question under consideration was thoroughly secular in nature."[10]

The hierarchy itself strove to set an example for the rest of the community in its scrupulous avoidance of any Protestant affiliations. For example, when Father Theobald Matthew, Ireland's great temperance crusader, visited Boston in 1849 and attended a rally on Boston Common with a large delegation of Protestant ministers and civil authorities, Bishop Fitzpatrick was openly critical: "This afternoon a mass meeting was held on the Common. The Governor then received Father Matthew, and the latter addressed the multitude. The platform was also covered by sectarian fanatics, Calvinistic preachers, and deacons and other such who also made their speeches. The appearance of fellowship between a Catholic priest and such men can hardly be without evil results."[11]

In the early 1850s, Fitzpatrick virtually forced Brownson, whom he had helped convert a few years before, to leave Boston because Brownson had urged in his Review that

"the Church in America must be American rather than Irish."[12] According to Oscar Handlin, Brownson's views "provoked a galling conflict with the Irish clergy that painfully grieved him and eventually drove him to New York where he hoped to profit from the less rigorous supervision of Archbishop Hughes."[13] In New York, Brownson reiterated his proposal that "the Irish would best prosper if they joined themselves to the American cultural majority in culture and public practice."[14] Archbishop Hughes, however, was even less sympathetic than Fitzpatrick and "wrote privately to Brownson ordering him to cease his efforts to make Americanism and Catholicism compatible."[15]

The physical manifestation of the Church's policy of religious separatism was the creation of a vast network of exclusively Catholic organizations and institutions which attempted to provide those services which either the state could not provide or which the Irish Catholic immigrants, fearful of Protestant proselytizing, were religiously inhibited from patronizing. Such organizations included schools, orphanages, asylums, hospitals, cemeteries, newspapers, and social agencies. The hierarchy's fear of Protestant proselytizing in state institutions was not totally unfounded. Prior to 1858 in Massachusetts, for example, Catholic services were forbidden in such institutions as jails, pauper houses, orphanages, and asylums.[16] The ubiquitous Brownson also spoke for the Church on this matter: "Hence we are frequently obliged to repulse their [Protestant] offers of assistance, and to prefer to see our

children starve in the streets to their being relieved by Protestant liberality."[17]

Some Irish Catholics were also willing to see their children remain uneducated rather than send them to the "godless" public schools where students recited the Protestant version of the Lord's Prayer and read the King James Version of the Bible. Oscar Handlin, for example, reports that by the end of the 1870s, "some 9000 of the 43,000 children in Boston between the ages of 5 and 15 were not in school, and most of them were Irish."[18] Local priests were instrumental in creating this serious truancy problem. One such priest, Father Thomas Skully, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Cambridgeport, took drastic action against those parents who persisted in sending their children to the public schools. He denounced them from the altar, denied them absolution, rejected them at the communion rail, and even refused them last rites.[19] Another priest resorted to denouncing children by name from the altar who had not refused to read the Protestant Bible in their schools.

If the Church was instrumental in limiting where the Irish lived, where they were educated, and with whom they consorted, it was also influential in circumscribing their social life. In fact, the parish church became not just the religious but the social center of the Irish community. As Levine explains, "Because of the importance of the parish church as the one institutional bulwark in a Protestant society, Irish social organization became permanently associated with the parish church, where they were under the

surveillance of the pastor."[20] The pastor was more than willing to assume the additional burden of providing for the social needs of his people because he was then able to monitor closely his parishioners' activities and protect them from potentially dangerous associations. One pastor that Levine interviewed spoke to this concern: "My instinctive response, and I'm from a thoroughly American Irish neighborhood, is that I'd be suspicious of unrelated [to the parish] Irish neighborhood organizations. I'd think they were Protestant."[21]

By the end of the nineteenth century, the American Irish, with help from their clergy, had succeeded in creating what amounted to a society within a society. The parish-centered community of the Irish was a closed, tightly knit world that was virtually complete unto itself. The self-sustaining nature of this world was noted by Arthur Kennedy and Robert Woods in The Zone of Emergence, their 1907 study of urban life in Boston. They found, for example, that the aforementioned Fr. Skully's parish, St. Mary's in Cambridgeport, had "developed a life of its own" and that the Irish section of East Boston was even more self-sufficient:

> Perhaps even more than in other Boston districts, the Irish Catholics of the island have developed a life of their own, parallel and more or less apart from that of the rest of the community. Their exceptionally adequate and strategically located churches; their parochial schools capable of caring for practically all the girls and many of the boys; their sodalities, societies, and boys clubs; and their possession of a fairly well defined and powerful community sentiment; gives them a singularly complete communal life of their own.[22]

Although the situation varied from community to community throughout the United States, the Irish in Boston, according to Robert F. Stack, Jr., constituted "an institutionally complete ethnic group" which tried to "satisfy all the physical and psychological needs of its members."[23]

The Church and its Irish constituency had met the challenge of nativist animosity with a bristling defensiveness, the physical manifestation of which was the establishment of the parish-centered ethnic enclave. No sooner had the Irish carved out their communal niche, however, than a number of factors emerged that pointed to the inevitable decline of such a community life. First, nativist anti-Catholicism, the very basis of Irish withdrawal, lost its momentum after the Civil War and went into near eclipse, uttering its last ugly gasp with the APA movement in the 1890s. Secondly, the overwhelming conservatism and defensiveness of the American Catholic hierarchy was diluted by powerful new liberal voices which advocated greater harmony between Catholicism and American society. Both of these developments made it easier for the Irish to venture out beyond their walled enclaves. The last, and perhaps most decisive factor, was the immigration of vast numbers of ethnic Catholics -- primarily from Germany, Italy, and Poland -- in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These new immigrants battered down the redoubts of the Irish community and demanded a voice in the upper echelons of Church leadership. Much as the natives had resented the Irish invasion of fifty years earlier, the Irish, in both the

hierarchy and the parish, bridled at the presence of these alien newcomers and fought to preserve their status.

When the immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe arrived in this country, the Church that greeted them was dominated by the Irish, especially at the top levels. Edward Wakin provides the following data on Irish hegemony in the American episcopate: "Between 1789 and 1935, 268 of the 464 U.S. bishops were born in Ireland or were sons of Irish immigrants. (This does not include third-generation Irish bishops.) In 1886, of the 69 bishops in the United States, 35 were Irish; the Germans came second with only 15."[24] The Irish have maintained their hold on the American hierarchy well into the twentieth century. Writing in the mid-1950s, James P. Shannon reports that "in our entire history, we have had eleven American Cardinals. All have been of Irish origin. We now have 26 Archdioceses, of which at least 17 are directed by Archbishops of Irish origin."[25] And in the 1970s, Andrew Greeley discovered that "the Irish constitute 15 percent of the Catholic population, 30 percent of the clergy, and over half the hierarchy."[26] On the other hand, the Italians, the largest Catholic ethnic group with 19 percent of the total Catholic population, comprise just 5 percent of the clergy and three percent of the hierarchy.[27]

A variety of factors explain the Irish rise to power within the Church. Of crucial importance, of course, was that they arrived first and spoke English. The sheer weight of their numbers and their strategic location were also significant. As the number of incoming Irish exploded after the

famines, more and more Irish priests followed their stricken people into exile in America. In fact, as Arnold Schrier notes, the hierarchy in Ireland decided that the best way to preserve the faith of the emigrants was to accompany them; thus they established a seminary in Dublin specifically designed to train priests for missionary duty in the United States.[28] These priests naturally followed their charges into the large cities where their proximity to the various diocesan sees gave them a greater opportunity for advancement than, say, the German priests whose people were scattered across the rural Midwest.

The special relationship between priest and people among the Irish, and the fact that most avenues of secular success were closed, also contributed to the growth of Irish power in the Church. A steady stream of intelligent and ambitious Irish youths flowed to seminaries across the land as they struggled to achieve the respect and upward mobility that were denied them in most other pursuits. Once in power within a diocese, an Irish bishop would naturally choose one of his own to staff the important diocesan posts. In many respects, the Irish rise to prominence in the American Catholic Church paralleled their rise in the political arena.

As Irish influence in the American Church hierarchy expanded, a diversity of opinion about the relationship between Catholicism and the American environment began to emerge. By the 1880s, a powerful liberal faction had sprung up to challenge the conservative, defensive posture that had characterized the Church since the 1820s. The major dis-

putants in this controversy over Americanism were all Irish. The liberals were led by the foremost Catholic clergymen of the day, Gibbons, Ireland, and Keane. The conversatives were headed by the New York hierarchy -- McCloskey, Corrigan, and McQuaid. The liberals advocated a rapprochment between Catholics and American society. They believed that America offered a fertile soil for the growth of Catholicism and embraced American culture with openness and intense patriotism. They also urged that the Church move boldly in framing progressive social policies that were in accord with both democratic practice and the needs of their predominantly working-class constituency.

The conservatives, on the other hand, were philosophical descendants of Hughes and Fitzpatrick. They viewed America and its democratic institutions with fear and suspicion and thus distrusted the laity's ability to enter fully into American society and remain Catholic. On social issues, they were reactionary, espousing the inviolability of private property and frowning upon Catholic participation in unions and strikes. The conflict between the two groups grew so bitter that at times it spilled over into the public arena. The Pope finally interceded to end the squabbling in 1900, but the philosophical differences were merely forced beneath the surface where they lingered unsettled for many decades.

Although the liberal and conservative Irish factions were at loggerheads over most matters concerning the Church's relationship with American society, there was one issue upon

which both sides could agree: that the incoming ethnic Catholics must be Americanized. Like the Irish before them, the Germans, Italians, and Poles arrived in America determined to recreate the religious life they had known in the Old Country. Fired by intense nationalism and religious zeal, they wished to preserve their traditional cultures in such areas as language, education, and religious observance. The basic demands of each group were similar: more churches in areas of heavy ethnic settlement, foreign-speaking prelates to staff them, and greater representation within the Church hierarchy.

The Irish-dominated hierarchy of whom these demands were made greeted them with unanimous disapproval. A major part of the leadership's negative reaction undoubtedly emanated from their fear that the establishment of separate ethnic enclaves within the Church would rejuvenate nativist charges of a "foreign" Catholic Church. Less principled perhaps but no less compelling motivations were the threat the new immigrants posed to Irish hegemony, and Irish prejudice and arrogance towards the newcomers. Since they had been in America the longest, the Irish believed that they were best suited to chart the future course of the Church and define its position in American society. They were loathe to cede any power to "foreigners" who would dilute their power and divide the Church. As Andrew Greeley notes, "Unfortunately, a number of those who claimed to be Americanizers acted as though it was essential for the good American Catholic to become an Irish-American Catholic."[29]

The immigrants themselves and their clerical leaders resented being under the thumb of the Irish whom they considered cultural non-entities and who, they complained to Rome, treated them as inferior Catholics. The inevitable result of the collision between the Americanizing Irish and the anti-Americanizing ethnics was a protracted, divisive, and often bitter conflict, the two most spectacular examples of which were the Cahensly dispute and the Polish schism. The Lucerne Memorial was a plan submitted to the Pope by Peter Paul Cahensly, leader of a German emigrant aid society, and supported by German-American bishops, which "sought approval for the concept that each nationality should have its own parishes, priests, and schools as well as a number of bishops proportionate to their percentage in the Catholic population."[30] The Irish in the hierarchy vehemently denounced the plan and Cahensly. Archbishop John Ireland of St. Paul, for example, angrily asserted that "we are American bishops . . . and effort is made to foreignize our country in the name of religion."[31] After urgent appeals by the Irish-American hierarchy, the Pope rejected the Memorial in 1892. Although German-American Catholics were bitterly disappointed with the decision, they remained within the fold.

Thousands of Poles, however, went one step further, breaking completely from the Church to establish their own Polish National Catholic Church. The schism movement began in 1896 in Scranton, Pennsylvania, when Polish parishioners petitioned the Irish bishop for a stronger voice in parish management.[32] When they were brusquely denied, the situ-

ation quickly escalated from hurt feelings to violent confrontation. Finally in 1900, the Poles, under Father Francis Hodur, went into schism and organized their own Church. Although the dispute over Cahenslyism and the Polish schism were the two most notorious examples of conflict between the Irish and the newer ethnic Catholics, they suggest the depth of the tension within Catholic ranks and the degree to which the newcomers felt like pariahs in their own Church.

The hierarchy's solution to the problems raised by the various ethnic immigrant groups was the establishment of the "national" parish, and later the so-called "duplex" parish. Traditionally, parishes had been founded on a territorial basis. National parishes were created to meet the language needs of a particular ethnic group, territorial considerations aside. Thus on the same street in some major cities, there might be several Catholic churches, each celebrating Mass in a different tongue. Greeley reports, for example, that "one can stand in Bridgeport and see within three blocks five church steeples -- the Polish, the Czech, the German, the Lithuanian, and the 'Irish.' The Irish church was a territorial parish which has more recently become known as the 'Italian' parish."[33] By Church law, each nationality group was supposed to attend its own church. If, as often happened, the bishop was slow to build a national parish, the late-arriving immigrants were assigned to use the basements of the Irish church. These "duplex" parishes were a stopgap measure despised by both the immigrants and the Irish. In 1889, for example, one Italian priest expressed his

displeasure with the duplex arrangement when he wrote:

> Day after day our experience proves to our eyes the inconvenience of mixed churches. Where there are Irish and Italians, for the Italians nothing is done except administering Baptisms and performing marriages. A word in the Italian language is never heard; Italians never go to confession and this notwithstanding the Bishops remain obstinate in preserving these mixed churches in the hope of Americanizing the Italians.[34]

In 1898, the shepherd of St. Brigid's flock in Manhattan expressed the general feeling of his fellow Irish pastors in a letter to Archbishop Corrigan: "It does seem necessary to have separate churches or chapels for the Italians, as they cannot well be mixed with other nationalities on account of their filthy conditions and habits."[35] These duplex parishes, with each ethnic group separated from the other within a single church, were apt symbols of the state of American Catholicism in the early twentieth century.

On a national scale, the Irish leadership of the American Catholic Church had fared tolerably well in dealing with the problems posed by mass immigration. By the time the immigrant flow had been stemmed by law in the early 1920s, they had succeeded not only in maintaining their own power but also in absorbing millions of new Catholics, with only one serious group defection. Although fragmented by language, culture, religious practice, and nationality, the various ethnic groups that made up the bulk of Catholic America remained bound by a single thread -- their common faith. On the local community level, however, where the Irish and the immigrants rubbed shoulders, where the feelings

were more intense and the stakes more tangible, the Irish fared less well. Just as a century before the Irish had pushed into the low-rent tenement districts and compelled the natives to recede before their advance, so in the early decades of the twentieth century the immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe forced their way into Irish neighborhoods and gradually drove the Irish out. In most areas where such displacement occurred, the process took several years with the established Irish residents ceding block after block to their alien co-religionists. For both the Irish priest and his parishioners, so long insulated by their parochial environment, this development caused deep-seated, lingering resentment.

In her 1930 study, Caroline Ware provides a thorough analysis of the corrosive impact that the influx of Italians had on the Irish community in Greenwich Village. The Irish were the first of the immigrant groups to settle in the Village, arriving in large numbers after the famines of the late 1840s. By World War I, they had succeeded in establishing a close, stable community life to which they attached a strong sense of "belonging." As Ware states, "The life of the Irish group had been led within the bounds of the district, where everyone knew all the neighbors on the block and rarely found it necessary to go outside for entertainment or friends."[36] After the war, however, this "self-contained functioning neighborhood" was shattered by massive Italian immigration.[37] Fearful of these alien interlopers, the Irish began to abandon their homes and move out of the Village.

Those who stayed behind bemoaned the loss of neighborhood solidarity and cursed the "foreigners" who "took the neighborhood away from them."[38] Relations between the remaining Irish and their unwanted Italian neighbors, Ware continues, ranged "from violent antagonism to indifference."[39] Ethnic hostility had erected walls between the Italians and the Irish within the neighborhood and even within a single tenement house.

Even the Church failed to bridge the gulf that separated the two groups. As Ware notes, "The fact of their common religion did little to bring the groups together, for a separate Italian-language parish had been formed when the Italian colony was still young. . . . In the one Irish church which was attended by a number of Italians, they were resented by the Irish because they did not contribute proportionately to the support of the church."[40] The Irish and Italian children were also segregated in the schools. The former sent their children to the parochial school and the latter to the local public school.

The Irish parish priests, clearly suffering from the same prejudice and resentment as their parishioners, exhibited little willingness to mediate the conflict. In fact, they probably contributed to it. Ware talked, for example, to one Irish priest whose attitude succinctly reflected the depth of the problem. This particular priest "confessed his distaste at having to marry the nice Irish girls to the 'greasy wops.'"[41]

The insularity and ethnic homogeneity that marked the

Irish neighborhoods in Greenwich Village were eventually washed away by the shifting currents of migration into and out of the area. The remaining Irish Villagers lost their sense of "belonging," and the Irish priests lost track of the parishioners they once knew by name. Once the respected leader of a thriving community, the pastor found himself the caretaker of a moribund parish in which the once inseparable link between social and religious functions had been shattered. Deprived of his status, and confused by the swirl of change all around him, such a pastor sometimes wallowed in his own resentment and simply gave up. The dissolution of the parish-centered Irish community that Ware describes in her study was repeated in thousands of similar communities throughout the United States as the twentieth century matured.

In The Edge of Sadness, written some thirty years after Ware's study, Edwin O'Connor focuses on the life of two Irish parishes in the same New England city. One of the parishes has long ago succumbed to the same fate that befell the Irish neighborhoods of Greenwich Village. O'Connor reveals, however, that even in 1960 the bitter legacy of inter-ethnic conflict has lingered long after the active animosity has ceased. The smoldering embers of clerical neglect have replaced the crackling flames of violent antagonism. The other parish is a paradigm of the insular Irish community of the nineteenth century which has managed to maintain its ethnic homogeneity and survive past the midway mark of the twentieth century. Behind its facade of stability and

vitality, however, O'Connor suggests an inner sickness that will shortly prove fatal. Spared the quick hammer blow from without, this relic of a bygone era, and others like it, will soon fade from the scene as a result of the process of attrition and internal decay. O'Connor was clearly ambivalent about the inevitable demise of such communities. On the one hand, he appreciated the security and supportiveness they could provide to both priest and parishioner. On the other hand, he recognized that the air could grow stale behind the closed doors of the Irish community, breeding lethargy, tension, ethnocentrism, and a dangerous confusion of priorities. Although the Irish community was changing, and the relationship between the Irish and their Church was entering an uncharted new era, O'Connor confidently pointed the way to a future which would be beneficial to both.

ENDNOTES

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[6]Theodore Maynard, The Story of American Catholicism (New York: Macmillan, 1941), p. 447.

[7]Maynard, p. 447.

[8]Robert H. Lord, John E. Sexton, and Edward T. Harrington, History of the Archdiocese of Boston (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1944), II, 460.

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[13]Handlin, p. 150.

[14]Thomas McAvoy, "The Formation of the Catholic Minority in the United States, 1820-1860," The Review of Politics, 10 (1948), 30.

[15]McAvoy, p. 30.

[16]Handlin, p. 162.

[17]Brownson, X, p. 594.

[18]Handlin, p. 217.

[19]Lord, Sexton, and Harrington, III, p. 82.

[20]Levine, p. 79.

[21]Levine, p. 79.

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[25]James P. Shannon, "The Irish Catholic Immigration," in Roman Catholicism and the American Way of Life, ed. Thomas McAvoy (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1960), p. 209.

[26]Andrew M. Greeley, The American Catholic: A Social Portrait (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 26.

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[28]Arnold Schrier, Ireland and the American Emigration, 1850-1900 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1958), pp. 63-64.

[29]Greeley, The Catholic Experience, p. 34.

[30]Ronald H. Bayor, Neighbors in Conflict (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 3.

[31]As Quoted in Edward Wakin, Enter the Irish-American, p. 100.

[32]Theodore Andrews, Th.D., The Polish National Catholic Church in America and Poland (London: S.P.C.K., 1953), p. 26.

[33]Greeley, The American Catholic: A Social Portrait, p. 226.

[34]As quoted in Silvano M. Tomasi, Piety and Power (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1975), p. 80.

[35]As quoted in Tomasi, Piety and Power, p. 81.

[36]Caroline Ware, Greenwich Village, 1920-1930 (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), p. 205.

[37]Ware, p. 203.

[38]Ware, p. 128.

[39]Ware, p. 129.

[40]Ware, p. 132.

[41]Ware, P. 131.

CHAPTER V

BEHIND THE PARISH WALLS

In The Last Hurrah, Edwin O'Connor chronicled the changes affecting the American Irish at the halfway mark of the twentieth century by focusing on their political behavior. Through his portrayal of Boss Skeffington's final, unsuccessful campaign for mayor, and his subsequent death, he suggested the passing of an era and the diminution of what Maurice Adelman calls "the traits which have made and which make the Irish so characteristically unique a race."[1] In The Edge of Sadness, O'Connor turns to a more somber but no less salient feature of Irish-American life -- their religion -- and to another of the Irish tribal leaders -- the priest. Narrated by its protagonist, the story centers on Fr. Hugh Kennedy's nightmarish descent into alcoholism and spiritual aridity after his father's death, and his eventual restoration to health. In his recovery, Fr. Kennedy is aided by the various members of the Carmody family whom he has known since childhood. Through the story of one priest's fall from grace and his subsequent rejuvenation, O'Connor reveals that the once inseparable bond of loyalty between the Irish and the Catholic Church is begining to unravel.

The signs of change and dissolution are everywhere. The

second-generation Irish, the bedrock of the American Church, remain steadfast in their loyalty, but their number grows fewer with each passing year. The younger generations, sophisticated, ambitious, and prosperous, are slowly drifting away both physically and psychologically. And the newer ethnic Catholics, once stifled by Irish hegemony, are beginning to make their presence felt within the Church. The homogenous, parish-centered Irish community, and the bond between the priest and people that helped create and sustain it are, O'Connor suggests, on the verge of extinction.

Although O'Connor felt a tug of nostalgia at the loosening of these old ties, the pessimism that clouded his view of the Irish political future in The Last Hurrah does not surface here. He was perceptive enough to realize that while the insular Irish enclave had served a beneficial purpose for the first and second-generation Irish, and to some extent still could, it had by mid-century grown too exclusive and static, thereby creating serious problems, especially for the clergy. In fact, O'Connor attributes the spiritual crises of both Fr. Kennedy and his best friend Fr. John Carmody to the Irish cultural milieu. Fr. Kennedy, for example, falls prey to the seductive demands of his role as tribal leader and drains his spiritual reserves, while Fr. Carmody attempts to reject them whole and withdraws into a misanthropic shell. When Fr. Kennedy is subsequently exiled from his comfortable Irish parish to one on skid row, his parochial ethnocentrism renders him incapable of serving his ethnically diverse flock. Ironically, it is Fr. Carmody who

finally confronts Hugh with his failure and thus restores his sense of priestly duty.

As Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. correctly observes, O'Connor's novel fuses two themes -- "the search for grace and the end of Irish America."[2] Equally important to the purpose of The Edge of Sadness, however, is O'Connor's judgement of the Irish cultural environment and its impact on the Irish Catholic clergy. As O'Connor told Edmund Wilson, he hoped that his novel would "encourage the Catholic Church in Boston to work beyond the somewhat exclusive limits which the Irish had tended to impose on it."[3] No longer merely a rueful chronicler of change as in The Last Hurrah, O'Connor in The Edge of Sadness became its sturdy advocate.

Although the bulk of Fr. Kennedy's narrative takes place a year after his recovery from alcoholism, his lengthy reminiscences about his days as a young priest, and the personal crisis that ensued, provide a revealing insight into the subtle dangers that lurk behind the benign facade of the parish-centered Irish community. Hugh recalls his early years as a priest with great fondness. After his graduation from the seminary and his ordination, Hugh was assigned to work as a curate at St. Raymond's, the same parish in which he was born and raised. This assignment, he asserts, was "the best possible beginning, the luckiest of breaks" because here he would be working among his fellow Irish, "the people I knew and liked so well."[4] Under the tutelage of an understanding pastor and filled with a sense of the freshness and wonder of his vocation, the young priest considered his

life "close to ideal."

Fr. Kennedy's delight at "coming home" was heightened by the warmth and respect with which he was greeted by his parishioners. In fact, by virtue of his position in the Irish community, Hugh was immediately elevated to the status of tribal leader. Hugh explains how the heady assumption of this role almost overnight manifests itself:

> You're not unaware that the Roman collar has given you new significance in another sense; I think it's a rare young priest who could remain entirely unaffected by the deference which is now paid him. Particularly when, in his new role . . . he comes back to familiar surroundings and finds that an old women who a few short years ago would have cracked him over the head with a thimble now flatteringly solicits his judgement. On what subject? On any subject. Probably in no other walk of life is a young man so often and so humbly approached by his elders and asked for his advice. (96)

Through Fr. Kennedy's rise from seminarian and fledgling priest to clan leader and sage, O'Connor suggests not only some of the allure of the priesthood to a young Irishman on the make but also the intense intimacy that underlay the relations between priest and parishioner in the insular world of the Irish community.

Such intimacy extended into virtually all aspects of his parishioners' lives. Fr. Kennedy was responsible not only for dispensing advice on practical matters and caring for the spiritual needs of his people, but also for providing social outlets for their relaxation and entertainment. In the self-sustaining world of St. Raymond's, Hugh notes, there was a "truly staggering list of parochial activities" (96). These included "organizing baseball teams for the altar boys

and choir boys, dances for the young people, father-and-son outings, bridge parties, picnics for the Holy Name Society, lectures, concerts" (96). To the Irish of St. Raymond's, the parish church was the focal point of their religious and communal life and Hugh the accessible and willing first point of contact.

Fr. Kennedy spent fifteen years at St. Raymond's, working hard but happily among "his own." Both he and his parishioners, Hugh asserts, were well pleased with his accomplishments: "I was active; I was talked about; I think it was generally agreed in the parish that I would 'go far'" (96). That assessment proved accurate in one sense but less so in another. When he was forty years old, Hugh did move up, becoming pastor of St. Stephen's, but he never truly moved beyond. According to Hugh, his new parish was "not an enormous change. . . . For St. Stephen's, located not far away from where I'd been, was a somewhat smaller, somewhat poorer St. Raymond's. That is, it was another of the old Irish parishes" (97). Whatever heartache Hugh may have felt at being transferred out of his boyhood parish was assuaged by the fact that he "understood the people and their problems" and by his tacit assumption that he would eventually return. As Hugh recalls, "I suppose that at the back of my mind there was always the feeling that this was somehow temporary, a stage on the road, and that one day, if all went well, I would be back in St. Raymond's, this time as pastor" (97).

Fr. Kennedy's attitude toward his new post is significant because it foreshadows the more serious problems he

would later have in living up to his clerical calling. His secret ambition to return to St. Raymond's, for example, betrays a cultural narrowness which in retrospect even Hugh admits is "too parochial, too snug." Inherent in his view of St. Stephen's as just a "temporary" position, moreover, is the risk of neglecting the present in the hope of some future reward. Although Hugh is able to avoid the twin dangers of provincialism and neglect while at St. Stephen's (it is, after all, another Irish parish), he would subsequently succumb to them and cripple himself as a priest.

The steadily upward curve of Fr. Kennedy's life as a priest came to a sudden end when, after five happy and productive years as pastor of St. Stephen's, Hugh's father fell seriously ill with cancer. In his prayers, Hugh asked that God grant his father "either the miracle of recovery or the blessing of a happy death" (103). His prayers, however, went unanswered. His father's condition grew steadily worse, and he eventually died "witless and in pain" (103). Overwhelmed by the horror of his father's agonizing death, Hugh lost interest in his work, withdrew from his parishioners, his curates, and his friends, and turned instead to alcohol. Within several months, his dependence on drink grew to the point that "the occasional help came to be a steady necessity. At all hours; at night so that I might sleep; the first thing in the morning to deaden the passage into the long, dull empty ache of the day. . . ." (107). His frequent resolves to quit were just as frequently broken.

Hugh finally realized that he was "God's priest" and in

desperation turned to Him for help. Again his prayers proved fruitless, but this time he realized with dismay, for a far different reason: he could no longer infuse his prayer with meaning. As Hugh sadly remembers:

> I could kneel, I knew the words, I could say the words -- and they meant nothing. At night, in the silent room, I could hear myself whispering phrases which I had known from the days when I first knew any words at all, which once had been charged with richness, and fervor, and love, but which now were empty formulae, dry wisps blown up from the desert of memory. (108)

"Badly frightened" by the realization that he was incapable of prayer, Hugh frantically searched his past to learn why he had turned to alcohol instead of God, and why, once he did seek Divine help, he found himself spiritually impotent. In a short time, Hugh found his answer, but it was not consoling. He realized, quite simply, that for the past twenty years, he had become so immersed in the multiple social aspects of his role as parish priest that he had become estranged from God. The spiritual center of his life, Hugh discovered, had been forced to the periphery, and "the young priest, without realizing it, had become little more than a recreation director: a cheerleader in a Roman collar" (109). In succumbing to the temptation of simply "being busy" with his myriad duties, Hugh had allowed his spiritual growth, his "connection with God," to wither. As Sister Mary Sandra notes, "The faith of the priest had become empty and meaningless to the man."[5]

O'Connor suggests that the closed world of the Irish subculture and the priest's role of tribal leader within that

cramped environment are largely responsible for Hugh's spiritual crisis. While O'Connor was surely cognizant of the fact that all parish priests are required to perform a multiplicity of duties, he also recognized that in the insulated Irish enclave, virtually all the community's activities -- secular and spiritual -- were united under the aegis of the parish. The pastor and his curates originally assumed the burdens of this integration in an effort to monitor their immigrant flocks and thus protect them from dangerous associations. One benefit of this parish-centered system was that the priest knew his parishioners intimately and was a compelling factor in their daily lives. As Hugh Rank notes, the central role of the priest also considerably enhanced his standing in the community: "The priest, as local leader of the people, was exalted in status; his image took on a 'halo effect'. . . an inflated ideal type."[6]

Despite the obvious advantages to both priest and parishioner of such a tightly knit, well-organized parish, there were also serious drawbacks. The Irish priest's additional role of clan leader, for example, could place an intolerable strain on his limited resources. Confronted with the demanding task of satisfying both the secular and religious needs of his people, he sometimes found it easier, as Hugh did, to be more social choreographer than God's intermediary. The intense intimacy engendered by shared experience and ancient racial ties could also prove burdensome in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the insular Irish subculture. Knowing his people, perhaps too well, the priest could fall victim to

complacent ethnocentrism on the one hand or to simple revulsion on the other.

Although Hugh had uncovered the reason behind his spiritual sterility, this discovery only brought him "closer to desolation" than at any time in his life (110). As Hugh observes, "Is it ever consoling to learn that you've been most mistaken in something of which you've been most proud?" (110). The consequence of this shattering epiphany is that Hugh began to drink more heavily and more openly. His growing despair and carelessness hastened the inevitable and, after one unheeded warning from the Bishop, Hugh was relieved of his pastorate and sent to The Cenacle, a rehabilitative center for alcoholic priests in Arizona.

Hugh spent four long, but ultimately successful, years in Arizona, after which time he was again summoned before the Bishop of the diocese, this time under much improved circumstances. Instead of being removed from his parish, Hugh was installed as the pastor of Old St. Paul's, a relic of a once-glorious past. Formerly a thriving Irish parish, Old St. Paul's had fallen victim to the shifting tides of urban migration and now stood lonely sentry over a "soiled and airless" slum populated by "Syrians, Greeks, some Italians, a few Chinese, the advance guard of the Puerto Ricans" (9). The church itself, Hugh states, "is the perfect mirror of the district . . . a derelict full of dust, flaking paint and muttering and homeless, vague-eyed men. This section of the city is dying and so is Old St. Paul's. In a sense, it is hardly a parish at all anymore, but a kind of

spiritual waterhole: a halting place for transients in despair" (9). As Hugh himself ruefully admits, the assignment fit the man. Who better to tend a decaying skid-row parish than an alcoholic priest looking to find his way back to grace.

As John V. Kelleher observes, however, Hugh is pleased with his new post and "grateful to the Bishop who gave him this rather dismal sinecure where he might recover his strength."[7] He was back in the city he loved but far enough away from his home parish that he need not suffer the daily embarrassment associated with the chastened prodigal's return. Moreover, the parish work was undemanding. Unlike the old days in which Hugh shared a dynamic connection with his parishioners, in Old St. Paul's the relationship is rigidly formalized. As Hugh confesses, "There are the formal, necessary points of contact between the shepherd and his flock -- beyond them we do not go" (10). Hugh also admits that in those disturbing moments of midnight self-inquiry, he feels the tug of the past, but these bouts of nostalgia are relatively rare and cause him little grief. In fact, Hugh is convinced, given his recent troubles, that Old St. Paul's is the best possible situation for him. As he says, "The work gets done, I don't neglect the people, and I can truly say this: that here, in this shabby corner, in what is undoubtedly the backwater of the diocese, I am happy" (10).

With this description of his first year as pastor of Old St. Paul's, Hugh brings to a close the painful memories of his personal tragedy. The reformed alcoholic and contented

caretaker of a parish gone to seed is the man we meet as the novel opens. As Sister Mary Sandra points out, however, the fact that Hugh has overcome his addiction does not mean that he has yet come to grips with himself as a priest or with the culture of which he is both a product and a victim.[8] Hugh's avowed satisfaction at Old St. Paul's is but an ill-fitting mask which barely conceals, even to its wearer, his self-delusion. In the remainder of the novel, Hugh is able to throw off this mask and achieve a fuller understanding of himself, his vocation, and his lost past.

The initial impetus for Fr. Kennedy's difficult journey to self-awareness comes from Charlie Carmody, the cantankerous miserly patriarch of the family which Hugh has known since his boyhood. According to Sister Mary Sandra, "It is Charlie Carmody, representative of the past life and values in the Irish-American community, who breaks into Hugh's isolation and is the instrument of his restoration."[9] Charlie accomplishes this simply enough by calling Hugh and inviting him to his eighty-first birthday party. Although Hugh is hesitant about finally returning home to St. Raymond's (where John is now pastor) and facing those whom he feels he has betrayed, he decides that the time is right and attends the ritual gathering of the clan. As Kelleher notes, during the celebration, "all the lines of communication broken by the narrator's collapse are restored with tactful affection."[10] Hugh mingles with the four generations of the Carmody family; he listens eagerly to the gossipy, peculiarly discursive talk of the old, senses the disillusion of those his own age, and

marvels at the polish and sophistication of the younger generation. Surrounded by the familiar sights and sounds, Hugh begins the process of reuniting himself with his roots and confronting his past, essential steps if he is to see himself and his culture with clarity.

Although Hugh is content, after this one excursion, to remain safely marooned on the island that is Old St. Paul's, the Carmodys, especially Charlie, do not allow him the dangerous luxury of sinking back into his secure world of isolation and illusion. The sprightly old millionaire calls frequently, drops in unannounced, and dragoons Hugh into a visit to the hospital where one of Charlie's aged cronies lies ill. In Charlie's wake come the other members of the clan, each to seek a favor, discuss a problem, or simply to renew a friendship. The fact that the Carmodys reach out to Hugh in this way is significant not only because it prepares him to face the reality of his deleterious situation, but also because it suggests the lingering power of the clannish, protective impulse that originally animated the insular Irish subculture. Although one of the main themes in O'Connor's story is that this protectiveness has turned inward upon itself to the detriment of the Irish and their clergy, O'Connor suggests, through the Carmodys' efforts to reclaim, reassimilate a lost son, some of the enduring value inherent in a true community.

Although it is Charlie who initiates and sustains Hugh's reluctant advance towards complete recovery, it is Charlie's son, John, Hugh's best friend, who painfully administers the cure. John is uniquely qualified to play the part of Hugh's

savior. Like his friend, John is a lifetime product of the insular Irish world and an inheritor of the role of tribal leader. Unlike Hugh, however, John is a solitary, introspective man upon whom this role weighs heavily. He feels so besieged by his parishioners and their petty problems and complaints that he turns bitterly against them. As David Dillon observes, "Unlike Hugh, he despises the Irish, finding them crude, sentimental, and provincial. His great ambition is to escape to some remote monastery where he will never have to listen to another brogue or another melancholy tale about a drunken husband or a wayward son."[11] Whereas Hugh becomes spiritually bankrupt by embracing too closely his "tribal responsibilities," John suffers the same fate by trying to avoid them and "shut out the past completely."[12]

The climactic scene in the novel comes when Hugh visits John at the rectory of St. Raymond's to discuss Charlie's progress after his recent heart attack. At the very mention of Charlie's name, John launches into a bitter tirade against his father whom he has long considered mean, selfish, and tyrannical. Once the floodgates of his suppressed hostility are opened, John transfers his attack to the Irish parishioners he wants so desperately to escape, claiming that all he is now capable of feeling for them is "total, overwhelming disgust! Not apathy, not indifference, but disgust. Disgust for the whole whispering, confiding, sniveling lot" (336).

Hugh is genuinely shocked by the depth of John's anguish and reminds him of his pastoral duty. Hugh's gently administered advice merely rubs the open wound of his friend's guilt and,

for a third time, John shifts his anger, now toward Hugh. While John admits that he has failed his parish, he accuses Hugh of being similarly derelict at Old St. Paul's, only in a different way:

> It's a haven. That's what Old St. Paul's is for you. Not a parish but a haven. A nice quiet recovery room for someone who's licked a Problem (341). . . . A real parish is an old-time parish. One with a fine, big, old-fashioned, well-kept church with -- and here's the important things -- lots of Irish to put inside it! People like ourselves, Hugh. The kind of people you grew up with: the kind of people you like . . . . Those are the people the Church was really meant for, wouldn't you say, Hugh? (342)

Instead of actively trying to know and serve his parishioners, the "few hundred strangers who look like extras in an Italian movie," John continues, Hugh has been living in the past selfishly cherishing a secret but impossible dream of returning to St. Raymond's and the "Backbone of the Church" (343). John concludes his brutal assessment by explaining what he sees as the only difference between the two men: "It's that I may have turned my back on my parish, but you've never even turned your face on yours" (343).

Within hours after delivering this witheringly candid attack on his friend, John suffers a hemorrhaged ulcer and dies, strangled by his own misanthropy. Fr. Carmody's death is freighted with symbolic import because he leaves behind him, in the truth of his words, the means by which Hugh can make himself whole. Hugh realizes that he has indeed neglected his parishioners at Old St. Paul's, neglected them simply because they were not Irish. Suffering from what John Gregory Dunne calls the "parochialism of the still unassimilated

Irish Catholic character," Hugh has confused the Irish with the entirety of the Church.[13] As Dillon succinctly states, "His Irishness has become his spiritual albatross."[14]

Even Hugh's dream of recapturing the past by returning to some idealized Irish parish like St. Raymond's is misconceived because such parishes are rapidly fading from the scene. The symptoms of their impending demise are everywhere about Hugh, but blinded by his own sentimentality, he has failed to notice them. The clerical composition of the Church in Hugh's New England city, once so uniformly Irish, is beginning to reflect the presence of the newer ethnic immigrant groups, at both the diocesan and parish levels. The Bishop of Hugh's diocese, for example, is a Midwesterner of Polish-German ancestry. More important, he is the first non-Irish bishop in diocesan history.

Father Danowski, Hugh's youthful curate at Old St. Paul's, is also Polish. Subliminally aware that he is an outsider in an overwhelmingly Irish environment, Fr. Danowski affects an elaborately formal manner of speech in order to lend himself legitimacy and status. John Kenneth Galbraith comments that Fr. Danowski's "stilted and pretentious syntax is in marvelous contrast with the relaxed accents of the secure and aristocratic Irish."[15] Although he is the object of Hugh's gentle condescension throughout the novel, Fr. Danowski is a better priest than his pastor. As Kelleher says, Hugh's "ridiculous curate is all individuality and large ordinary faith and cheerful dedication -- not the perfection of a priest, just a true priest."[16] Fr. Danowski

earnestly performs the time-consuming pastoral chores that Hugh neglects and then subtly transmits his knowledge of the parish to his unwitting pastor. The presence in the novel of Fr. Danowski and the Bishop is significant because they portend the inevitable decline of Irish hegemony within the Church and also, as Hugh Rank points out, because they serve as "foil characters . . . to Father Kennedy."[17] Their energy and genuine sense of catholicity contrast sharply with Hugh's parochial complacency and spiritual enervation.

If the Bishop and Fr. Danowski signify the inescapable attenuation of Irish clerical dominance, Ted O'Donnell, Charlie's grandson, suggests that the relationship between the younger generation of Irish laymen and the Catholic Church is also growing devitalized. In conversations with Hugh, Ted and his young wife mistakenly identify a Franciscan's garb as that of a Carthusian and question Hugh about the appropriateness of administering last rites. Albeit these are small errors, Hugh recognizes that they are mistakes that Charlie and those of his fast-disappearing generation could not possibly have made. At another point in the novel, Ted asks Hugh if he can pass the collection basket at Old St. Paul's to garner votes for his upcoming congressional campaign. Hugh is shocked by the cynicism of Ted's request and refuses him permission. According to Galbraith, the implications of Ted's actions are clear: "The new generation are no longer strongly committed either to the Church or to each other."[18] As the young Irish move into the middle class and the bitter memories of past injustices wane, O'Connor suggests, the

insular parish-centered Irish community and the bond between priest and people will fade as well.

Fr. Carmody's dying words, then, finally awaken Hugh to the inherent falsity, the unreality, of his dream and the crippling effect its presence has had on him as a priest. As Dillon states, he realizes that "a priest's marriage is to God, not to a particular ethnic group."[19] That Hugh has at last come to grips with himself as a priest and with his culture is shown when he rejects the Bishop's offer to appoint him to the now vacant post of pastor of St. Raymond's. He chooses instead to remain at Old St. Paul's and serve the people he had so badly neglected in the past. In so doing, Hugh feels that he will be restored to the fullness of God's grace:

> And at this moment, here in the rectory hallway, I stood aching with excitement, for suddenly it seemed to me that something might be ahead which grew out of the past, yes, but was totally different, with its own labors and rewards, that it might be deeper and fuller and more meaningful than anything in the past, and that as a priest in Old St. Paul's . . . I might, through the parish and its people, find my way not again to the simple engagement of the heart and affections, but to the Richness, the Mercy, the immeasurable Love of God. . . ." (375).

It is ironic that only by rejecting the past, by overcoming the cultural constraints imposed by the insular Irish subculture, can Hugh rediscover the true meaning of his vocation.

Although The Edge of Sadness is O'Connor's most somber, introspective work, it is also one of his most optimistic. Implicit in Fr. Kennedy's renunciation at the end of the novel

is O'Connor's belief in the enduring power of transcendence in a materialistic modern world. Hugh's restoration to grace also suggests that the Catholic Church and its Irish clergy could rise above the cultural myopia the self-contained Irish community once engendered. O'Connor later confirmed this view in All in the Family. Through the character of Fr. James Kinsella, he indicates that Irish clerics have succeeded in moving beyond the narrow horizon of the Irish cultural milieu to embrace the ecumenical spirit generated by Vatican II.

In an unfinished novel entitled The Cardinal, O'Connor hoped to examine in greater detail the turbulent era in Irish-Church relations following the dramatic changes instituted by the Vatican Council. According to John V. Kelleher, one of O'Connor's closest friends, The Cardinal "would be a continuation and deepening of the movement already strongly defined in his best novel, The Edge of Sadness, a movement toward the future rather than to a fondly remembered past."[20] His new novel would also have undoubtedly been another testament to his own unshakable faith, a faith which animated and enriched The Edge of Sadness.

ENDNOTES

[1]Maurice Adelman, "The Irish Observed," The Furrow, 12 (1961), 719.

[2]Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., ed. The Best and the Last of Edwin O'Connor (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 19.

[3]Edmund Wilson, "The Great Baldini: A Memoir and a Collaboration, "Atlantic Monthly, Oct. 1969, p. 66.

[4]Edwin O'Connor, The Edge of Sadness (New York: Bantam, 1961), p. 97. All subsequent quotations from this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text by page number.

[5]Sister Mary Sandra, S.S.A., "The Priest-Hero in Modern Fiction," The Personalist, 46 (1965), 529.

[6]Hugh Rank, Edwin O'Connor (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 123.

[7]John V. Kelleher, "Curious Indeed the Way God Works," The New York Times Book Review, 4 June 1961, p. 1, col. 4.

[8]Sister Mary Sandra, pp. 529-530.

[9]Sister Mary Sandra, p. 530.

[10]Kelleher, p. 1.

[11]David Dillon, "Priests and Politicians: The Fiction of Edwin O'Connor," Critique, 16 (1974), 116.

[12]Dillon, p. 116.

[13]John Gregory Dunne, "Steerage to Suburbia," National Review, Oct. 1961, p. 239.

[14]Dillon, p. 116.

[15]John Kenneth Galbraith, "Sadness in Boston," The New Yorker, 24 June 1961, p. 94.

[16]Kelleher, p. 33.

[17]Hugh Rank, "O'Connor's Image of the Priest," The New England Quarterly, 41 (1968), 17.

[18]Galbraith, p. 93.

[19]Dillon, p. 116.

[20]John V. Kelleher, "Edwin O'Connor and the Irish-American Process," Atlantic Monthly, July 1968, p. 51.

CHAPTER VI

HOME AND HEARTH

In his review of The Edge of Sadness, John Kenneth Galbraith makes the observation that the conflict between the upstart Irish and the Yankee establishment that figured so prominently in The Last Hurrah is almost entirely absent from O'Connor's new novel. This development, Galbraith continues, can be attributed to the fact that historical events in the decade between the publication of the two books, most specifically the possible election of an Irish Catholic to the presidency, had forced O'Connor to concede that "in America the Irish are in." Galbraith then suggests how O'Connor was able to solve the problem that the success of the Irish had created for him as a novelist:

> Because the author is not able to talk of the struggle between the Irish and their precursors, his solution is a struggle between the Irish and the Irish. He finds, or invents, a formidable tension between those who are fully acculturated and those who are not.[1]

For O'Connor, the gulf between the various generations of Irish was nowhere more apparent or more intense than in their family life.

O'Connor's treatment of the theme of inter-generational conflict in the Irish-American family is atypical. Most historians and sociologists who deal with this subject focus

on the clash between first-generation parents and their second-generation children. By its very nature, this story is more compelling, encompassing as it does the twin horrors of famine and steerage, the hard scrabble of urban life imposed by poverty and discrimination, and the fierce collision between Old World values and New World conditions. At the time O'Connor was writing, however, this drama had largely been resolved for the Irish. Instead, therefore, he focuses primarily on the more subtle, yet still at times intense, conflict between the second and third generations, more specifically, on the rough, vastly ambitious second-generation fathers who have overcome indigent beginnings to achieve enormous success, and their more sophisticated, Americanized sons. In O'Connor's fiction, it would seem, no paupers or women need apply.

The fact that wealthy, dominant patriarchs and their sons absorb O'Connor's attention could reflect tensions within the author's own family. Through his fiction, O'Connor may have been trying to resolve enduring conflicts with his father, a successful and widely esteemed doctor who asserted himself as the head of the entire O'Connor clan.[2] One can readily imagine how such a man might view his son's decision to be a writer, especially when conspicuous monetary success proved so elusive for such a long time. Unfortunately for O'Connor, his father died just after The Last Hurrah was published, and his debilitating illness apparently prevented him from witnessing his son's triumph.[3] O'Connor's increasing pre-occupation with family life as a whole may also be a

product of personal concerns, most specifically his marriage in 1961. Many of his closest friends suggest that not only did this union fulfill O'Connor, but that his new wife and stepson made him more aware of familial problems and responsibilities. Just as O'Connor may have found it necessary to draw on his own past to animate his fiction, so too is it necessary to review the raw materials of history to define the nature of Irish family life, both as it existed in Ireland and as it evolved under the impact of the American environment.

To be properly understood, family relations among the rural Irish in the nineteenth century must be placed within the context of the peasant's attachment to the land and to his village. To the peasant, the land, usually a meagre plot of earth, was not just his livelihood but his link to the past and his hope for the future. On it he and his ancestors were born, in it they had invested countless lifetimes of toil, and to it he hoped to be consigned when he died. If all went well, he would leave behind a male heir who would perpetuate the family legacy. The peasant's piece of property was not, however, an individual, isolated socio-economic unit. It was but one part of a complicated mosaic that made up the community to which the peasant belonged. As Oscar Handlin observes, "The bonds that held these men to their acres were not simply the personal ones of the husbandman who temporarily mixes his sweat with the soil. The ties were deeper, more intimate. For the peasant was part of a community and the community was held to the land as a whole."[4]

The village community was not merely a specific geo-

graphical location, a dot on the map, but a way of life. It was an intricately balanced network, comprised of sundry parts, and bound together by the commonly accepted adhesives of "relationships, of ties, of family, of kinship, of many rights and obligations."[5] Each member of the village community knew his role and was obliged by long-standing practice to fulfill it. In their seminal study of family and communal life in Ireland, Conrad Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball comment on how the communal life of the village served to regulate the peasant's behavior:

> The custom and rivalry of the community exert a further restriction upon his activity. He works within the influence of a long-established tradition of ancestral experience. . . . The community holds that tradition in common, and the farmer is caught in the midst of a mesh of rivalries, competitions, and gossip which binds him the more strongly to the accepted patterning of his yearly activity.[6]

While the interdependence and tradition of the farm community provided the Irish peasant with a certain degree of welcome security, they also helped to squelch his desire for innovation and individualism. To attempt to rise beyond one's appointed status, or to acquire more than what was one's due, would upset the delicate balance of the community and thus draw down upon the upstart ready condemnation.[7]

The basic socio-economic units that made up the village community were, of course, the surrounding family farms. Arensberg and Kimball provide a description of the typical small farm in rural Ireland:

> The farmhouse is most often . . . a comparatively isolated house standing upon its own ground and forming an integral part of the holding. In it the farm family spends its entire life, sleeping,

> eating, giving birth and dying there, and sallying forth every day for work upon the fields. The farm family lives and performs almost all of its work within this spatial unit of land and house. And the unit is identified with the family in the eyes of its community in name and ownership.[8]

The behavior learned at birth within the home and the specific roles designated for each family member were designed to ensure maximum harmony and productiveness, not only for the farm family itself, but also for the community as a whole.

A strict division of labor and authority, based on age and sex, obtained within the Irish farm family. Heading the group was the husband and father who ran the farm and made the major decisions affecting its management. He was responsible for all the heavy work outside the home, in the fields, bogs, and pasturage. Any profits that accrued from his labor were his to spend. According to Arensberg and Kimball, however, the father was obligated by custom to dispense the money in such a way that it met the needs of his entire family: "Though he can make what disposal he will of the funds earned by the labor of the group, his wife and children can expect as of right that he shall make it for the family as a whole in which each member receives his share."[9] Although the basic structure of the Irish family was patriarchal, it was a patriarchy limited by shared obligations.

The mother was second in position of authority on the rural Irish farm. She was primarily responsible for the maintenance of the house and yard and for the raising of the children. She did the vital chores of cooking, cleaning, sewing, gardening, and milking that kept the family unit

functioning smoothly. As with her husband, any money the wife earned from selling dairy products was hers, subject to the demands of the entire household. Although the Irish farm mother was a definite force within the family, her tasks were not considered as important as the man's. Moreover, as Robert E. Kennedy, Jr. points out, her confinement to the home and to the roles of wife and mother was rigidly enforced by the weight of long-standing practice.[10] In fact, the widespread acceptance of this custom was later reflected in the Irish Constitution: "The State recognizes that by her life within the home, woman gives to the State a support without which the common good cannot be achieved. The State shall, therefore, endeavour to ensure that mothers shall not be obligated by economic necessity to engage in labour to the neglect of their duties in the home."[11]

The relationship between rural Irish parents and their son changed with the boy's age. Until the age of seven, the mother was in complete control of the child. The relationship was usually a very close one, since care of the children was one of the mother's prime functions. Her will with the child was most often enforced during these early years through a combination of "praise, persuasion, and endearment."[12] At around the age of twelve (or whenever the boy left school for good), he passed into the control of his father, with whom he acted the role of apprentice. He would learn the time-honored ways of the fields and pastures and assist his father in the heavy chores. The son, however, was not allowed to transact business or to keep all the money he

earned as a hired hand off the farm. The father's authority over his son ended when the father died or when the son married. Arensberg and Kimball discovered an apt reflection of the son's lengthy subordination to the rule of his parent in the fact that forty and fifty-year-old males still living under their father's roof were referred to by the neighbors as his "boys."[13] An unfortunate outgrowth of the father's dominance over his sons was an often tense and distant relationship. As Arensberg and Kimball note, "There is none of the close companionship and intimate sympathy which characterizes, at least ideally, the relationship in other groups."[14] The mutual affection developed from childhood between mother and son, however, was generally maintained.

Of all the members of the Irish farm family, the daughter was in the least enviable position. As Kennedy, Jr. asserts, "The subordination of daughters in many Irish families was severe."[15] The daughter's function on the farm was as the mother's helper, and she would usually remain in this role until her marriage, if one could be arranged. As with her brothers, the money she earned in her various endeavors off the farm was not entirely hers to keep. For the most part, her life was one of constant menial labor that provided little satisfaction or hope of reward. According to Kennedy, Jr., the inferior status of farm girls was reflected in the relatively high rates of mortality for Irish females and in the high proportion of single females who chose to emigrate to the cities of England and the United States.[16]

Since the family as a socio-economic unit was locked by

bonds of tradition into an intimate relationship with the larger village community, marriage and the transfer of the holding from one generation to the next were of critical importance. As Handlin notes, "The whole family structure rested on the premise of stability, on the assumption that there would be no radical change in the amount of available land, in the size of the population, or in the net of relationships that held the village together."[17] Before the famines in Ireland, the distribution of property at marriage was arranged according to what is known as the "joint family system," in which all of the sons could expect to inherit a part of the holding. By the mid-nineteenth century, however, this system had reduced the size of the farms to the point where further subdivision was no longer practical. As a result, the "stem family system" was put into operation.[18] Kennedy, Jr. explains the basic difference between the two methods of transferring property:

> Unlike the joint family, in which all sons inherited part of the family wealth or held the wealth communally, in the stem family system only one child inherited control over the family holding. Upon reaching adulthood, the other children either remained on the home as unmarried, unpaid helping hands, or they left home.[19]

In the stem family, one son, not necessarily the oldest, would assume control of the property upon the father's death or retirement, whereupon the son would marry. The dowry of his bride would then be used to provide for the remaining children. Since the father was often unwilling to cede the prerogatives of power until he was quite old, the son might not replace him until he was well into his adult years. Once

the son and his wife took over, the retired couple would remain on the farm, serving in an advisory capacity, until their deaths. If there were daughters in the family, only one was usually allowed to marry, since the family could afford but one dowry.

One of the principal results of the Irish stem family system, according to Kennedy, Jr., was that it "motivated and permitted individuals to remain permanently single, or to marry at a relatively late age."[20] In fact, the rates of late marriage and permanent celibacy in Ireland today are the highest in all of Western Europe.[21] The unhappy prospect of remaining on the farm as an unpaid, single laborer also gave impetus to the desire to emigrate.

Oscar Handlin asserts that the collapse of "the granite-like quality" and "enormous stability in peasant society" in Europe produced America's "army of emigrants."[22] In Ireland's case, a prolonged series of short-sighted English agricultural and land reform acts had succeeded in weakening the structure of Irish communal life. When the famines struck, the entire system broke down and for many Irish peasants their only choices were starvation or emigration. Thus many of the Irish who made the perilous journey to America's cities came from a society which was predominantly rural and communal. They came from families whose reputations and identities were invested in their land, and whose leadership reflected a hierarchical structure that began with the husband and father on the top and flowed downward through the mother, then to her sons, and on the bottom, the daughters.

From the moment that the decision to emigrate was made, however, the Irish peasant was subjected to conditions and demands that cut him off forever from his rural, communal style of life. As Handlin asserts:

> Although entire communities were uprooted at the same time, although the whole life of the Old World had been communal, the act of migration was individual. The very fact that the peasants were leaving was a sign of the disintegration of the old village ways. . . . It was immensely significant that the first step to the New World . . . was the outcome of a desperate individual choice.[23]

The lengthy, dangerous process of migration was the Irish immigrant's initial lesson in learning to deal with the challenges of life in urban America. At every step of the migratory process, from the point of embarkation, to the harrowing passage in steerage, and finally to settlement, the immigrant had to make choices and decisions by himself that would affect his fate and the fate of his entire family. He soon learned, according to Handlin, that "the qualities that were desirable in the good peasant were not conducive to success in the transition."[24] The observant immigrant quickly saw that it was the aggressive fellow that placed himself and his family first who made out best.

The lessons learned during passage, however, could in no way fully prepare the Irish for what lay in store for them upon their arrival. As William Shannon observes, "The history of the Irish in America is founded on a paradox. The Irish were a rural people in Ireland and became a city people in the United States."[25] Many Irish chose to settle in America's cities to be near their fellow countrymen who had preceded

them, and to be near the Catholic Church. The great majority simply had no choice; penniless upon arrival, they were forced to remain in the port of disembarkation.

The appalling socio-economic conditions which prevailed among the Irish immigrants in America's cities in the nineteenth century are well known. It is perhaps sufficient to say that the Irish found themselves an unwanted racial and religious minority whose lack of education and job skills, combined with the discriminatory practices of the host society, confined them to frightful ghettoes in which all manner of social ills were rampant. Cut off from the land and the ancient and accepted communal norms, the Irish were hard pressed to accommodate themselves to the myriad, alien ways of urban life. In the course of their adjustment to these new conditions, the Irish family was also forced to adapt.

Many of the modifications in the structure of the first-generation Irish family were in some way related to the harsh economic conditions that existed in the urban slums. One of the first casualties of the immigrants' inability to make ends meet was the extended family. As Handlin notes, "The larger unit was now a source of weakness rather than strength. Those who could broke away; it was madness for a man who was capable of supporting himself to maintain the ties of uncle or cousin when those ties would only draw off a share of his earnings."[26] What remained was the nuclear group: a father and mother and their children. In the process of paring down to the basic family unit, the maintenance of which each member was obligated to share, the family grew

closer together.

Ironically, the very same conditions that initially pulled the family together began, after only a short while, to break it apart, to realign the traditional family roles. Handlin suggests that the greatest impact was probably felt by the father because "in all matters, the New World made the peasant less a man."[27] While there is a difference of opinion among historians and sociologists about the nature of the father's role in the Irish-American family, there is enough evidence to indicate that the traditional patriarchal structure that obtained in Ireland was weakened by conditions in the United States. There are two principal reasons for this development. The chronic, dispiriting unemployment that afflicted so many of the first-generation Irish sabotaged the husband's role as provider and thus undermined his authority within the family. As Handlin explains, "He felt respect ebb away and carried about a gnawing shame at his lack of capacity. Most of all he resented his loss of authority. Indeed he became accustomed to request, not to order . . . and he resented his wife's growing dominance over the household."[28]

Even when the Irish father found relatively steady employment, the nature of his labor was such that inevitably it contributed to his wife's growing sway within the family. For the majority of first-generation Irishmen, employment meant an endless round of back-breaking, physical labor. William Shannon describes the nature of this work and its often fatal consequences:

The fathers in most families were engaged in

> manual labor that was hard and usually dangerous. These men died young. They wore themselves out dragging, lifting, hauling, digging, standing, or shoveling for ten, twelve, or fourteen hours a day with rarely a break and never a paid holiday. Industrial accidents for which there was no compensation crippled or cut them down. They fell easy victims to tuberculosis and pneumonia, or they exhausted themselves and, like Alfred E. Smith's father, died of nothing more identifiable than a nameless weariness.[29]

The early death of the father was an all too common occurrence for the Irish immigrant family in the nineteenth century. The result, of course, was an increasing number of households headed by women. Mary Catherine Mattis reports, for example, that 18% of the Irish families in Buffalo in 1855 were run by women.[30] The percentage of women who headed families at any given time during this era was probably even higher, given the fact that so many men were employed away from home on the labor gangs building canals and railroads.

If the father saw his authority slowly slip away in relation to his wife, the same phenomenon occurred with his children. In this pain his wife also shared. As Marcus Lee Hansen notes:

> Even the immigrant father who compromised most willingly in adjusting his outside affairs to the realities that surrounded him insisted that family life, at least, should retain the pattern that he had known as a boy. Language, religion, customs, and parental authority were not to be modified simply because the home had been moved four or five thousand miles to the westward. When the son and daughter refused to conform, their action was considered a rebellion of ungrateful children for whom so many advantages had been provided. The gap between the two generations was widened and family spirit embittered by repeated misunderstanding.[31]

For an Irish father reared in a tradition in which children

showed proper deference and knew their place, the growing independence of their American-born offspring proved a discouraging, even frightening, experience.

The stress of adjusting to the new familial roles demanded by American conditions also proved difficult for the second-generation children themselves. According to Hansen, the sons and daughters of the immigrants "were not slow in comprehending the source of all their woes: it lay in the strange dualism into which they had been born."[32] At home, they were subjected to the Old World values of their parents, while outside, in the schools or in the streets, they were learning to be Americans. Although the tug of war between these two competing value systems was intense, the American environment would inevitably prove stronger. According to Thomas C. Wheeler, however, the second generation paid a steep price for their independence:

> The emotional suffering of the second generation, the American-born, may have been as intense. For, in rejecting those who bore them, they could take on a feeling of betrayal and a burden of guilt. The sore sacrifice America asked of its immigrant sons has been a denial of origin, and the consequences of that denial, though often invisible, are real. Changed names, altered faces, dropped religions are but the conspicuous signs of the identity crisis America provoked.[33]

In his memoirs, the late Cardinal O'Connell of Boston recalled witnessing the "physical and social transformation" of several of his Irish boyhood friends who, in their eagerness to "belong," totally sloughed off their racial and religious identity: "The renegade from the people's ranks soon took on all the airs and even the nasal dialect of those who now

formed his constant associates. . . . He finally gave up entirely the faith of his fathers of which he was now ashamed."[34] O'Connell's scorn for those who abandoned their cultural heritage, still evident in his tone fifty years after the event, suggests the depth of feeling on both sides that must have accompanied the second generation's desire to succeed in America.

The vast majority of first-generation Irish immigrants were unable to rise above their lowly beginnings and remained trapped in the urban ghettoes. Their second-generation sons and daughters fared somewhat better. According to Shannon, they realized early on the vital lesson that in America "competition set the tone, and commercial success was the criterion."[35] By the time they had reached adulthood, many had already learned that lesson in the streets, shining shoes, hawking newspapers, or leading a gang. Knowledge and striving notwithstanding, most of the second generation remained in the working class. The higher up they reached, the more they came into economic competition with the native American labor force. Their livelihoods now at risk, these wage earners quickly closed ranks and slammed shut the avenues of upward mobility.[36]

Emergence into the middle class for those few second-generation Irish lucky or ambitious enough to manage it was usually achieved in one of two ways: through a neighborhood-based entreprenurial enterprise, or through the political process. Shannon describes the nature of Irish business life in the immigrant community: "The early Irish business-

men . . . did not have the capital resources or the personal connections to make a frontal entry into the main areas of business such as manufacturing, mining, and banking. . . . They were the blacksmiths, saloonkeepers, grocery-store owners, small contractors."[37] These men usually lived in the neighborhood and relied for their profits on the patronage of their fellow immigrants. Success in a local business was closely linked with success in politics, the chief avenue of upward mobility for the urban Irish. Once installed in power in municipal government, the Irish politician used his pull and the patronage jobs at his disposal to recruit fellow Irish into the city's labor force. Within a short while, the Irish dominated virtually every level of the municipal bureaucracy. The Irish of the second generation, keenly aware of the precarious economic straits of their parents, craved such civil service jobs because of the security a steady paycheck provided. The political process was probably responsible for elevating more Irish into the middle class than any other secular pursuit.

Only a tiny percentage of the children of the Irish immigrants was able to reach the top levels of business or the professions. The central characters in O'Connor's fiction come from this elite group, the Irish aristocracy. In his book, Real Lace, Stephen Birmingham profiles the lives of some actual second-generation titans, men such as James Francis McDonnell, Thomas E. Murray, and Robert Cuddihy. All of these men had several attributes in common: they were smart, tough (ruthless, their enemies would say), and incredibly

ambitious. Beginning with nothing, and smarting from the sting of poverty and their status as outcasts, they thrust themselves into the single-minded pursuit of money in order to compensate. As Birmingham asserts, "Throughout the story of the Irish in America runs the theme of money -- money and, with it, social acceptance."[38] These Irishmen managed to amass great wealth through banking, real estate, and stock manipulation. They were conspicuously and deliberately good Catholics; they sent their children to the best available schools; and they kept their distance from the shanty Irish. Unfortunately, none of this was enough to grant them the social status they desired. The WASP elite refused to recognize them as their equals.

Caroline Ware provides the best picture of family life within this broad spectrum of second-generation parents and their third-generation children. In her study of the Irish community in Greenwich Village in the 1920s, Ware discovered "four principal economic classes -- the 'down and outers,' the truck drivers, longshoremen, and men with a trade, those with white-collar and city jobs, and the politicians, professional and businessmen."[39] Parents on every level of this widely accepted social scale, Ware continues, wished to see their sons enter business or the law as a first choice, with civil service jobs considered the second best alternative. For their daughters, a position as a school teacher was favored.[40] Within the home itself, Ware found that the Irish family was basically patriarchal but in a more diluted form than earlier: "Although the assumption of authority of

the head of the house was given lip service with the 'Go ask your father' formula, there was more likely to be a fifty-fifty distribution of authority in actual practice in most homes."[41] Apparently, the difficulty of life in America's cities had taken its toll on the father's supremacy. In the relationship between parents and children, "There was no important gulf between the generations."[42] Although their usually large families might be "internally quarrelsome," the Irish presented a generally united front to the world. Ware explains that this unity stemmed from the fact that "the culture pattern of the Irish-American world . . . was not in the process of disintegration and reconstruction as was that of the Italian, but had already developed a generation or more before."[43] Ware's findings suggest that as the Irish as a group moved into closer harmony with the American environment, the internal familial strife which had afflicted earlier generations had begun to dissipate.

The drive to escape the ghetto begun in a tentative way by the second-generation Irish was accelerated by subsequent generations, apparently with startling results. Writing in 1977, Andrew Greeley states flatly that "the Irish are the most successful gentile group in the United States both financially and educationally."[44] His assertion is based on a wide-ranging series of studies conducted by the National Opinion Research Center. These studies reveal that the majority of the Irish today have achieved the middle-class status that had eluded their parents and grandparents. Ellen Horgan Biddle provides a picture of one segment of this Irish middle class:

> Out of the strength of parish families, in which fathers and mothers stressed economic and educational advancement, and in which the children grew up during the Great Depression and the strains of World War II, have come professional and business men and women whose lifestyles vary little from those of other successful urbanites and suburbanites. Many have degrees from private Protestant colleges, from state universities, and from Catholic colleges. They are integrated into American life, live in neighborhoods of professional and business families . . . and have close friends among many groups. Their orientations are to their organizations, companies, professions, and communities first.[45]

The sons of the wealthy second-generation patriarchs that dominate O'Connor's novels evince similar characteristics to those middle-class Irish that Biddle describes.

The family portrait that Greeley paints of the contemporary Irish differs somewhat from that provided by Ware. He describes the Irish as likely to marry later, divorce less often, and have larger families than the national mean. Their families are also characterized by their relatively high levels of centralized power and affection but rather low level of supportiveness. As a result of this odd mixture of qualities, Greeley describes the Irish father's relationship with his children as "intense, combining a high level of affection with a high level of disapproval."[46] More effective transmission of parental values will occur, Greeley asserts, in families with a high level of support but a low level of power. In Irish families, however, the situation is reversed and, as a result, children will have a "propensity to rebel against explicit parental values."[47]

The family situation that Greeley describes would seem to explain a relatively recent phenomenon among the children

of those Irish who achieved middle-class status in the mid-twentieth century: downward mobility. As Biddle reports, the children of second and third-generation parents "appear less interested in striving for achievement in professions and business."[48] In her study of the effect of ethnicity on adolescent adjustment, Rita Stein discovered a similar trend. The Italian-American boys she surveyed defined happiness and success in terms of money and material rewards, perhaps as a result of their more recent immigrant background, while Irish-American youths equated success with the attainment of "personal satisfaction and personal esteem on internal levels."[49] Implicit in the younger generation's emphasis on personal development is a rejection of the ambitious, overt materialism that marked the striving of their parents and grandparents. The younger generation's drift away from the materialistic values of their elders may also be a measure of the latter's success in breaking down the barriers to upward mobility. With the external obstacles to success reduced, perhaps the drive and incentive that motivated earlier generations of Irish have also declined, or been redirected into less financially rewarding but more personally satisfying avenues.

Irish-American family life has undergone numerous changes in the nearly 150 years since the first huge waves of immigrants began arriving in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century. The harsh and radically different conditions of American urban existence splintered an Irish family structure that had long been based on a rural and

communal way of life. During this process of change, internal family harmony was subject to severe stress. Within a relatively short span of time, however, the Irish family reconstituted itself along different lines and gained a new sense of stability. As Greeley, Stein, and Biddle point out, cracks in this seemingly solid facade of family unity occasionally break to the surface. Through his creation of vibrant fictional characters, Edwin O'Connor breathes life into the sociological and historical data about disunity within the Irish-American family.

ENDNOTES

[1]John Kenneth Galbraith, "Sadness in Boston," The New Yorker, 24 June 1961, p. 90.

[2]Hugh Rank, Edwin O'Connor (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 17.

[3]Rank, p. 96.

[4]Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted (1951; rpt. Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 8.

[5]Handlin, p. 8.

[6]Conrad M. Arensberg and Solon T. Kimball, Family and Community in Ireland (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1940), p. 40. As with nearly all modern scholars, I am indebted to these men and this book for much of the subsequent data on family life in Ireland.

[7]Handlin, p. 21.

[8]Arensberg and Kimball, p. 31.

[9]Arensberg and Kimball, p. 48.

[10]Robert E. Kennedy, Jr., The Irish: Emigration, Marriage, and Fertility (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), p. 200.

[11]As quoted in Kennedy, Jr., The Irish, pp. 200-201.

[12]Arensberg and Kimball, p. 59.

[13]Arensberg and Kimball, p. 56.

[14]Arensberg and Kimball, p. 57.

[15]Kennedy, Jr., p. 52.

[16]Kennedy, Jr., p. 65.

[17]Handlin, p. 13.

[18]Conrad M. Arensberg, The Irish Countryman (1937; rpt. Gloucester, Mass.: Peter Smith, 1959), p. 73.

[19]Kennedy, Jr., p. 13.

[20]Kennedy, Jr., p. 13.

[21]Kennedy, Jr., p. 1.

[22]Handlin, p. 7.

[23]Handlin, p. 35.

[24]Handlin, p. 55.

[25]William V. Shannon, The American Irish (New York: Macmillan, 1963), p. 27.

[26]Handlin, p. 205.

[27]Handlin, p. 72.

[28]Handlin, p. 211.

[29]Shannon, p. 37.

[30]Mary Catherine Mattis, "The Irish Family in Buffalo, New York, 1855-1875: A Socio-Historical Analysis," Diss. Washington University (St. Louis) 1975, as quoted in Ellen Horgan Biddle, "The American Catholic Irish Family," in Ethnic Families in America, ed. Charles H. Mindel and Robert W. Habenstein, 2nd ed. (New York: Elsevier, 1981), p. 96.

[31]Marcus Lee Hansen, "The Third Generation," in Children of the Uprooted, ed. Oscar Handlin (New York: George Braziller, 1966), p. 258.

[32]Hansen, p. 257.

[33]Thomas C. Wheeler, ed., The Immigrant Experience (1971; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1975), pp. 9-10.

[34]William Cardinal O'Connell, Recollections of Seventy Years (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1934), p. 40.

[35]Shannon, p. 36.

[36]Handlin, p. 238.

[37]Shannon, p. 36.

[38]Stephen Birmingham, Real Lace (New York: Harper and Row, 1973), p. 282.

[39]Caroline Ware, Greenwich Village, 1920-1930 (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1935), p. 214.

[40]Ware, p. 215.

[41]Ware, p. 219.

[42]Ware, p. 215.

[43]Ware, p. 215.

[44]Andrew M. Greeley, The American Catholic: A Social Portrait (New York: Basic Books, 1977), p. 4.

[45]Ellen Horgan Biddle, "The American Catholic Irish Family," in Ethnic Families in America, ed. Charles H. Mindel and Robert W. Habenstein, 2nd ed. (New York: Elsevier, 1981), pp. 106-107.

[46]Greeley, p. 196.

[47]Greeley, p. 205.

[48]Biddle, p. 107.

[49]Rita F. Stein, Disturbed Youth and Ethnic Family Patterns (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1971), p. 206.

CHAPTER VII

FATHERS AND SONS

In The Last Hurrah and The Edge of Sadness, Edwin O'Connor showed how the acculturation of the Irish and the concomitant diminution of ethnic Irish distinctiveness were manifested in the disappearance of the political boss and the break-up of the insular parish community. Through the demise of these two prominent public symbols of Irish cultural identity and solidarity, O'Connor suggested that the younger generations' loyalty to and dependence on the boss or the parish priest had been undermined by the attenuation of discrimination, real or felt, the increase in educational and career opportunities, and the subsequent upward mobility that moved them out of the old neighborhoods, both physically and psychologically. Many of these new members of the middle class no longer felt "attached" to their cultural heritage and in fact sought to distance themselves from it. The dislocations and tensions that were manifest in the public arena in this process of disengagement were also felt, first and perhaps most keenly, in that most private of places, the home. Although the theme of Irish-American family life and the conflict between the generations was important in these two earlier novels, it

emerged as the central motif in O'Connor's later fiction.

The one familial relationship that dominates all of O'Connor's novels about the American Irish is that between fathers and sons. O'Connor's patriarchs are the pioneers of the second and third generations who, driven by an indefatigable ambition to escape their poverty and prevail in a harshly competitive and hostile American environment, have achieved success in such various fields as politics, real estate, show business, and finance. Now, at midcentury, these men, ranging in age from their late sixties to their early eighties, constitute the lingering vestiges of a bygone era characterized by the torchlight parade, the wake, and the homogenous Irish parish. The aged repositories of the old Irish values are not the stereotypical grandfatherly types who take quietly to their rocking chairs, spinning old tales and charming the grandchildren. They are active, vital men whose ambition and drive keep them alive. Nor are they particularly charming. As they are unable to let loose of their ambition, so too are they incapable of sheathing the weapons that enabled them to achieve success. These are wily, manipulative, eccentric, and self-centered dynamos whose desire to dominate and get ahead filters down into their familial relationships and, in many cases, destroys them.

In O'Connor's novels, the sons bear the heaviest burden of coping with these ageless wonders. Though bound by blood and ethnicity, the younger generation does not share the values of its elders. As Dillon notes:

> The new breed are separated from the old by their education (expensive boarding schools, Ivy League colleges), their professions (law and finance, usually in prestigious Yankee firms), and tastes (upper-middle class, cosmopolitan). All are members of the establishment that their ancestors feared and hated and have no appreciation of the ancient struggles except as material for anecdotes and Hibernian pageants.[1]

Their parents' persisting attempts to exert patriarchal prerogatives, to control or dominate their sons' lives, inevitably result in friction. The fathers are characteristically disappointed in their sons, and they, in turn, view their elders with a mix of emotions ranging from mere incomprehensibility, to ambivalence, to outright hatred.

Although O'Connor depicts his patriarchs in a generally unflattering way, he clearly laments their disappearance. They were picturesque, energetic, colorful personalities who, for better or worse, stamped their indelible mark upon their era. He laments their passing the more so because of those who displace them. While the older generation were, in Edmund Wilson's words, frequently "hypocritical, tyrannical, and completely self-centered," the younger generations of Irish are depicted as bland, robotized non-entities who blend seamlessly into the American landscape, or as traditionless cosmopolites with refined manners and hearts of ice.[2]

The relationship between Frank Skeffington and his son Francis, Jr. plays an important role in The Last Hurrah on both a personal and symbolic level. The senior Skeffington is a second-generation product of the tenement slums who latched onto politics as a way to escape the poverty and

menial labor that marked life in the Irish ghettoes of the late nineteenth century. A man with the talent to match his ambition, Skeffington was not content with the job of mere functionary in the party machine and, in a rapid climb up the ladder of power characterized by guileful, daring machinations, he soon seized the top prize in the city's political hierarchy, the mayor's seat. For the next fifty years, he had ruthlessly crushed the various challengers from within his own ranks and from the Yankee establishment. Moreover, he had confirmed himself not only as the boss of his party and city, but also as a tribal leader, the symbol of Irish aspirations. His reign in power was typical of the boss rule of his day -- personal, paternalistic, and corrupt. As Kate Simon points out, his political defeat and death at the end of the novel "mark the extinction of his species -- not only his particular mold, but the mold of the Irish-Americans whose minority isolation bound them to their leaders with intense undeviating loyalty."[3]

Though pre-eminently a politician and public figure, Skeffington also maintains a private life as a husband and father. As the novel opens, Skeffington's wife, Kate, has been dead for nearly ten years, but his later nostalgic musings reveal that his devotion to her had been total. In fact O'Connor avers that Kate was the only person to whom Skeffington could give his full trust, "his single ideal confidante."[4] From this felicitous marriage, Skeffington and his wife had only one child, a son named Francis, Jr.

In this relationship, Skeffington was far less successful.

As a result of Skeffington's achievements, Francis, Jr. had been provided with all the advantages denied his father. He had been raised in a comfortable, middle-class environment and had lived all his life with his family in their "big house on the avenue," a residence much like the one in which his grandmother had worked as a domestic servant more than half a century before. Francis, Jr. had also been furnished a solid education at "preparatory school, college, and law school" (15). The young Skeffington had failed, however, to live up to the promise inherent in all these opportunities. He had merely "skinned through" the various levels of his schooling, gaining but one mark of distinction in the process: "in his junior year at college he had been voted Best Dancer in his class" (15); and it was only as a result of his father's intercession with the Dean (which took the form of thinly veiled threats) that he had made it through law school. After his graduation, Skeffington had again stepped in to help his son by securing him what amounted to a sinecure in the city's "Corporation Counsel, a department which had been for some years under Skeffington's control" (16).

Although willing to come to his son's rescue, and pleased that "he's good, he's moral and he's likable," Skeffington had endured his progeny's tribulations with growing trepidation and displeasure. To his wife alone did he confide these fears and offer a dire prediction of his son's future: "He's a puffball. No weight at all. Twenty-

one years old, and everybody still calls him Junior; they'll call him Junior when he's ninety" (16).

Sixteen years later, as Skeffington launches his final campaign, his forecast has proven alarmingly accurate. The "waltzing featherhead" of his college days has not been changed by the passing years. Now thirty-seven, Francis, Jr. is still unmarried, still confined to the same anonymous position in the city's bureaucracy, and still called Junior "by friend and foe alike." Though "thoroughly agreeable," "well tailored," and "untouched by scandal or disgrace," Francis, Jr. shows no sign of developing any maturity or sense of responsibility. He dances all night, sleeps late in the morning, and shows up for work only intermittently. So absorbed is he with the latest dance step that he sees his father but infrequently and is blissfully oblivious to his political career. His weaknesses are revealed most tellingly on the occasion of his father's heart attack. Francis, Jr. is so unhinged that his cousin, Adam, must step in to run the household. When his father suffers a second, fatal attack several days later and calls for his son from his deathbed, Francis, Jr. is out socializing with his friends and cannot be located.

While Francis, Jr. has remained unchanged through the years, his father's assessment of him has not. Once "baffled and badly disappointed by his only son," Skeffington is now positively embarrassed, all the more so since the young Skeffington is "virtually a physical duplicate of his father" (15). As O'Connor writes, "The resemblance was

so astonishing that Skeffington, looking at his son in recent years, could only groan at the unkind mockery of the mnemonic shell, smiling emptily at him across the dinner table" (15). Skeffington's disappointment and embarrassment surface frequently throughout the novel. He speaks to his son in a tone of barely concealed sarcasm, avoids mentioning his name in public, and squirms with discomfort when they appear together at the watch party on election night. Skeffington's frustration at Francis, Jr.'s immaturity eventually compels him to reach out to his nephew Adam as a kind of surrogate for whom he can feel the respect and pride so tragically absent in his relationship with his son.

Given a bare outline of their vastly different backgrounds and subsequent relationship, it is not difficult to discern the reason that Skeffington and his son live as virtual strangers under the same roof. After fifty years of solid accomplishment, of which he is justifiably proud, Skeffington is disappointed to discover that the same motivation and thirst for success that propelled him to the top of his profession are missing in his only son. When he complains of this to his wife, however, she pointedly tells him, "You expect too much. You want him to be like you and the simple fact of it is that he can't be. It's not fair to expect it of him" (15).

Rose's explanation is accurate enough as far as it goes -- Francis, Jr. does not possess the capacities of his famous father -- but it is incomplete. Skeffington's success in a general sense and his behavior towards his son

on a more personal level are at the crux of the two men's estrangement. Skeffington was in the vanguard of those second-generation tyros who blasted through the barriers of discrimination erected by the host society. In his wake came the succeeding generations of Irish who enjoyed the economic and educational opportunities their elders had made possible. Blessed with these advantages, some among the younger generation, men like Francis, Jr., grew up lazy and complacent, their ambition dimmed by comfort. Unfortunately, Skeffington fuels this complacency in his son on a more intimate level. He uses his influence to grease his son's path in life and, in the process, prevents him from developing any sense of responsibility. As Francis, Jr. naively tells Adam, "Dad's always handled all the arrangements around here all by himself" (324). Only at the end of the novel, when Skeffington is dead, does Adam sense the real possibility that Francis, Jr. will mature.

The relationship between Skeffington and his son also functions in the novel as a symbol of the boss's connection with his client group. O'Connor suggests that Skeffington's paternalistic attitude toward his Irish constituency produces the same pernicious effects on them as it has had on his son. The Irish have become so used to the hand-outs and favors granted by the boss that they have grown overly dependent and unable to think for themselves. Skeffington's retinue, especially the aptly named Ditto Boland, serve as appropriate reminders of this slavishly deferential posture. Moreover, the Irish share the complicity for Skeffington's

corrupt practices. Just as Francis, Jr. may mature and flourish once removed from his father's lengthy shadow, so too, O'Connor suggests, may the Irish once the boss has departed the scene.

In The Last Hurrah, the conflict between father and son is relatively mild. In The Edge of Sadness, however, the struggle is conducted at a higher emotional pitch and has more serious, even deadly, ramifications. The character toward whom all the filial heat rises is Charlie Carmody, the eighty-one-year-old patriarch of the Carmody clan. In many ways, Charlie's life resembles that of his contemporary, Frank Skeffington. Charlie was one of a large brood of children reared in a tenement in the city's Irish slums. As he recalls, his father "laid pipe in this city twelve hours a day and got paid a dollar for doin' it."[5] With the family close to starvation on several occasions, little Charlie was forced to help out financially by rising every day at four in the morning to sell newspapers on the streets. From these lowly beginnings, the ambitious youth had moved into real estate and gradually accumulated a fortune. In fact, Charlie became a millionaire landlord who owned many of the same dilapidated structures that once housed the Irish but which were now rented to the newer races of immigrants, chiefly the Italians and Poles.

Charlie's rise from the brutal hardships of his youth to a position of wealth and security was achieved, however, at a high cost. The rough and tumble, savagely competitive world from which he emerged had engrained in him a perverse

combativeness, an aggressive egotism, and a desire for dominance that lingered long after the war for survival had been won. Charlie explains to Fr. Hugh Kennedy the way things were and what was required to get ahead in his early years:

> And when I was on my way up, d'ye know how many around here gave me a break? Not a soul. Not a livin' soul. But I got there all the same, and once I did I gave them no more breaks than they gave me. That ain't what the catechism tells us, is it, Father? But it's the way I done it. The only way I knew how. And maybe it was bad and I'm not sayin' it wasn't, but I dunno was it so much worse than what most others were doin'. Oh, I might of give it an extra little twist here or there, the way you have to do sometimes, but I swear to God I never thought it was anythin' dreadful. Like a monster or somethin'. It was more like a kind of game you knew how to win at better than the other feller. (290)

Fifty years later, Charlie is still playing the game with his tenants, dressing up in old clothes and collecting his rents personally.

Unfortunately, Charlie also practices his gamesmanship in the more intimate arena of his family. As Granville Hicks says of Charlie:

> He became a wealthy man, but the driving force within him was not spent with the achievement of his success. He still had to impose himself on everyone with whom he came in contact, and in his old age, as we look at him, he is still engaged in fashioning an image of himself and compelling others to accept it. . . . As almost goes without saying, in the course of building a pedestal for his ego Charlie has done great damage to his children.[6]

Although Charlie can be credited with sparing no expense in affording his children the finest of educations, all of his offspring bear the permanent scars of life with this most

difficult father. Mary, the weakest of the children, has buckled under completely to Charlie's will and lives with him as his maid, a pathetic spinster drudge. Dan is a ne'er-do-well businessman always looking to get rich quick and always prepared to get out of town even quicker. He has managed to avoid jail only as a result of Charlie's grudging intercession. In many ways, Dan, whom Hugh calls a "vastly imperfect mirror of his father," resembles Francis, Jr. Charlie's youngest daughter, Helen, placidly endures a loveless but secure marriage with a pompous physician to which she was driven by her desire to escape the same fate that had befallen Mary. She is the only child of Charlie's to have had children of her own, and the only one to have told her father that she hated him.

Of all Charlie's offspring, however, John, the pastor of the church in Charlie's home parish, is the most seriously affected by his father's autocratic personality. Early in John's life, according to Hugh, he had looked upon Charlie with a puzzled "incomprehensibility"; in the course of the years, however, his attitude had stiffened into a bitter, unrelenting hatred. As Hugh Rank points out, "The antagonistic obsession of Father Carmody was based not only on what Charlie had done to him, but also on how Charlie had wrecked the lives of all within the Carmody family."[7] John was especially rancorous about his father's treatment of his wife. As he tells Hugh, "He was at his best with my mother. He must have invented a hundred different ways of plaguing her, humiliating her -- no day was complete without its

little dig" (331). For the last two years of her life, Charlie's wife spoke hardly a word to him.

The depth of John's feelings about his father leads to tragic consequences. His consuming animosity for this one man eventually grows into a full-blown misanthropy, of which the most active part is his revulsion from the Irish and their world, which his father represents. Since John is the pastor of an old-style, homogenous Irish parish, his antipathy towards his flock involves a constant, wrenching dilemma with respect to the performance of his pastoral duties. Finally, eaten away inside by his hatred on the one hand, and his guilt on the other, John suffers a fatal ulcer attack.

Whereas John is ultimately forced to reject his father and the Irish values and way of life that he represents, Ted, Charlie's fourth-generation grandson, finds them totally irrelevant. Hugh is startled to discover, for instance, that Ted simply forgets to tell Charlie about his plans to run for Congress. When Charlie is finally informed and offers his grandson some advice, Ted condescendingly dismisses it, and Charlie, as interesting but useless scraps of Americana. As he tells Hugh, "It's all wonderful stuff to listen to, of course, but it's not the kind of thing you could use in a campaign today. . . . We usually have people in these nights . . . and they're fascinated by him. They've never seen anything like him before" (281). Ted's reaction to his grandfather conjures up the image of a schoolchild gawking at the mounted skeleton of a dinosaur in

a museum.

When Ted reveals his ignorance about the last rites and cynically seeks to use the Church to garner votes, Hugh realizes that Ted is far removed not only from Charlie's world, but from his own as well. While lying seriously ill, Charlie, perhaps speaking for O'Connor, gives Hugh his blunt assessment of Ted:

> I'm a tough man, Father, and John's a cold one, but with all the nice manners and the soft voice Ted just startin' out is tougher and colder than the both of us put together. There's the lad knows what he wants. And let's see anyone stop him from getting it. And when I go I s'pose he will miss part of me. He'll miss my vote. But he won't miss me. (294)

According to Dillon, Ted Carmody is another of "O'Connor's young people who are ungrateful heirs of their cultural traditions."[8]

Whereas in The Last Hurrah and The Edge of Sadness the theme of familial conflict among the Irish was subsumed in the larger story of Irish involvement in politics and the Church, in I Was Dancing it takes center stage. The central character in this novel is seventy-eight-year-old Waltzing Daniel Considine. Like Skeffington and Carmody, Daniel is a second-generation product of the hard times that gripped the Irish community in the late nineteenth century. As he pointedly tells his son, "I didn't have anyone to take care of all my bills and bring me up and see to it that I was educated with the finest in the country. No, I did it all by myself."[9] Daniel's bootstrap was not politics or the Church, however, but show business. Early on, Daniel

developed a special love for dancing and the stage. Once captivated by the thrill of the audience's applause, Daniel did not allow anything to stand in his way, not even his family. Exasperated by his wife's insistence that he find a steady job that did not require travel, Daniel selfishly abandoned his wife and young son to follow his consuming desire for stardom. For the next fifty years, Waltzing Daniel Considine danced on stages around the world, keeping in touch with his family through postcards, an occasional birthday present, or an even more infrequent visit.

Daniel's rejection of his familial responsibilities engendered in his only son a deep animosity. Like John Carmody's, however, Tom's resentment of his father centered on Daniel's callous treatment of his wife, Rose. His lack of concern was most clearly manifested by his behavior on the occasion of his wife's death some thirty years later. As O'Connor observes:

> Daniel had come home for the funeral, arriving just in time for Mass. He had spoken of an interrupted engagement; he had expressed sorrow quickly; he had remained dry-eyed; he had talked briefly and uneasily to his son; four hours later, he was gone. And after that Tom had not seen him for twenty years. (162-163)

Although Daniel's neglect of his wife left her an embittered woman, Tom was not visibly scarred by the experience. In fact, with the funds that Daniel was successful enough to provide, and which undoubtedly assuaged his guilt, Tom attended "a succession of conservative and expensive boarding schools," college, and finally, law school. After passing the bar, he had landed a job at the oldest Yankee

law firm in the city, got married, and then settled comfortably into a middle-class life in the suburbs. To all appearances, he had emerged a beneficiary, not a victim , of his father's success, despite the latter's desertion of his family.

O'Connor subtly suggests, however, that beneath the surface of Tom's apparent contentedness lay old wounds that have not healed. Tom married, for example, at the relatively late age of thirty-seven and, as the novel opens seven years later, he and his wife remain childless. Tom's marital situation, although common enough in contemporary Irish-American families, indicates not only a fear of intimate involvement but also doubts about his ability to raise and care for children, legacies perhaps of Daniel's reprehensible behavior. Tom's position at the law firm may also be significant in this regard. O'Connor describes his career status in the following:

> He was pleasantly and even rather profitably employed. He was not a major figure in the office, but neither was he unimportant. Like many similar firms, this one periodically refreshed itself with a number of bright young men. A few of these did very well; some did well enough; the rest, after a suitable period, were politely diverted to shabbier or shinier firms, or to the government. Tom, a bright young man of twenty years ago, had done well enough. (pp. 60-61)

While it may be that Tom was simply an average legal talent, O'Connor offers the possibility here that the example of Daniel's ruinous ambition has caused his son to subconsciously settle for less. Whatever the cause, Tom seems to represent another of that bland horde of middle-class Irish

who have lost the drive and motivation of their fathers and grandfathers.

At the age of seventy-seven, Daniel finally came to the conclusion that his dancing days were over. With nowhere else to go, he returned home for the first time in twenty-one years, showing up at his estranged son's door at midnight. At first, Tom and his wife were fascinated by the old man's stories but, as Daniel's short visit lengthened into an apparently permanent retirement in their guest bedroom, their hospitality waned dramatically. Finally, after nearly a year, Tom and Ellen called Daniel to a family conference and informed him that he must move to a rest home. It is at this point, the day on which Daniel is to leave, that the story begins, and ends.

Since the novel was originally written as a play, the action is confined to this single day and, for the most part, to Daniel's bedroom. Though it is somewhat cramped as a result, the unity of time, place, and character keeps the emotion at a sustained pitch. The heart of the story consists of a series of fierce verbal skirmishes between Daniel and his son, as the wily old performer tries to ward off his imminent eviction. Daniel uses every ploy in his actor's repertoire in an effort to evoke Tom's pity and guilt. He feigns illness, threatens public exposure of his son's heartlessness, and even brings up an old wound of his own. When Tom was in college, he and two friends had gone to see Daniel perform. Backstage after the show, Daniel had been hurt to see that his son was embarrassed by his

waltzing parent.

Although Tom had suppressed his resentment toward his father in the year since his unexpected return, Daniel's unabashed trickery finally shatters his attorney's reserve. Tom launches into a bitter attack against his father for his long-ago betrayal and, more importantly, for his behavior since he returned home. While Tom certainly bears a deep grudge against his father, revenge is not the basis for his decision to evict Daniel. What really motivates Tom is his realization that his father has not changed in the nearly fifty years since he abandoned his family. He is still totally self-absorbed. As Harold C. Gardiner points out, "Dan doesn't really care about the boy and the boy's wife. All he wants is a cozy home as a haven from his wanderings."[10] Daniel's selfishness is revealed when he hangs up on callers who ask for Tom or Ellen, whose name he cannot remember, invites his aged pals over to visit at all hours, and refuses to participate in any conversation in which he is not the central topic. The young Daniel, whose ambition caused him to leave his family, has now become an old man who abandons his son and daughter-in-law every day to live in a sunlit past. Symbolic of Daniel's current neglect is the fact that every morning he lovingly reads and then re-reads the scrapbook which details the highlights of his lengthy career.

Toward the end of the novel, Tom sadly realizes that "his father and he did not meet and could not meet" (211). Past grievances aside, Daniel lives in the mysterious world

of old age, a world his sophisticated son simply cannot penetrate or understand. When Tom overhears one of Daniel's conversations with one of his cronies, for example, he does not appreciate what John V. Kelleher calls "the familiar arabesques" so characteristic of the talk of the older Irish; instead, he wonders if his father might be senile.[11] As Julian Moynahan observes, Daniel and his son are "strangers and opponents" despite the fact that they are "tied together by blood and instinct."[12]

O'Connor's last-published novel, All in the Family, is the longest, the most complex in theme and structure, and therefore the most ambitious of all his works. On a surface level, the novel details the political designs of the fabulously wealthy Jimmy Kinsella and his sons, Phil and Charles, as they attempt to reform a local government left in bankrupt disarray by their notorious precursor, Frank Skeffington. Through the contrast between the old-style politics of the boss and that of the new breed, who are characterized by their affluence, education, and urbanity, O'Connor measures the socio-economic advance of the Irish toward full acculturation and their concomitant retreat away from any active sense of ethnic identity and solidarity. Irish involvement in politics, however, is merely an ancillary theme in the novel. O'Connor's central concern is the disruptive impact of the American environment on Irish family life, and specifically on its patriarchal structure. As Howard Mumford Jones comments, "In this book, as in the others, the patriarchal role is eaten into by modernity.

American life, it appears, is the enemy of the traditional family pattern."[13] O'Connor conveys this theme by once again focusing on the relationship between the hard-driving patriarch, Jimmy Kinsella, and his three sons, James, Charles, and Phil. The novel is narrated by Jack Kinsella, Jimmy's nephew, whose own familial problems intersect with and comment on those of his cousins.

Jack opens his narrative with an extended flashback of his youth. The highlight of this segment of the novel is his poignant description of a tragic boating accident in which his mother, whom he later learns has had a history of mental instability, and his younger brother are drowned. Despondent over the death of his wife and son, John Kinsella, for whom Jack is named, takes his remaining son to Ireland to recuperate. After a brief stay in Dublin, where John and his wife had spent their honeymoon, they decide to visit Uncle Jimmy and his family who are currently living on the site of a ruined castle in the Irish countryside. As they set out by car in search of Jimmy's castle, Jack asks his father about the Kinsella family, and especially about this uncle whom he has seen but infrequently. Through this rather simple device of a father-son chat, O'Connor provides the background data which are necessary to ground the Kinsella family saga in a historical context.

As it turns out, Jack's inquiry about his forebears is a timely one; as his father points out, the boy's great-grandfather was born "not far from where we were driving now in a cottage with a dirt floor and a roof made of straw."[14]

He had come to America while a young man and, like many Irishmen of that period, had worked on the labor gangs that were building America's vast network of railroads. From these rather lowly, but altogether typical, beginnings, the Kinsella family's fortunes in the United States had risen swiftly to great heights.

This laborer's son, Jack's grandfather, had amassed great wealth through his ruthless, and apparently somewhat shady, dealings in real estate and banking. Like most of O'Connor's self-made, second-generation patriarchs, however, Jack's grandfather was a hard, miserly man. John Kinsella later reveals, for example, that although his father was a millionaire, he perversely hid his success from his family and lived like a pauper in a three-tenement house over which he ruled like a petty tyrant. Although he was sent to the finest schools and, to his surprise, was endowed with a huge inheritance upon his graduation from college, Jack's father could never bring himself to forgive his own parent's cruel deception and the hardship it caused his overworked mother. He had made known his resentment by rejecting his father's acquisitive materialism and by using the money from his inheritance to cultivate a patrician life of travel and leisure. He had also rejected his father's patriarchal authoritarianism and renounced any ties with the family, both of which give his son, as narrator, the necessary distance from which to assess objectively the travails of his uncle's family.

Whereas John Kinsella had inherited a fortune but

spurned his father's values, his older brother Jimmy had eagerly embraced both. As Jack's father comments, "Your grandfather had a way of finding money in places where other people didn't even suspect it existed. . . . When it came to that your grandfather was a very gifted man. What surprised everyone about your Uncle Jimmy was that once he left school and began to fly a little on his own, he turned out to be even more gifted" (43). Although he became a millionaire at twenty-one, Jimmy's drive and ambition had not been dulled. He had, in fact, taken command of his aging father's business interests and, through relentless effort, succeeded in forging a corporate empire of international scope. Jimmy's opulent style of life and his insolent attitude towards those Irishmen less fortunate than he suggest a deliberate attempt to divorce himself from his cultural heritage. As Dillon notes, "Jimmy . . . acquires all the accoutrements of the Irish gentleman, including a castle, coat of arms, and wolfhounds, while despising everything they represent. In Ireland he behaves like an arrogant colonist while at home he plays the stage Irishman, because he has learned it is good for business."[15] Jimmy's haughty ostentation marks a radical departure from the basically middle-class Irish orientation of other O'Connor patriarchs such as Charlie Carmody and Frank Skeffington.

The Uncle Jimmy that Jack meets when he arrives at the castle has assumed control not only of his father's financial holdings but also the reins of patriarchal authority within the Kinsella clan. That Jimmy takes seriously his

self-avowed role as head of the entire family is clearly evinced in his efforts to convince his brother to let Jack live with him and, more important, in his ambitions for his own sons. Jimmy wants the boys to mirror their father, to possess the same drive and desire for excellence that motivate him. Toward this end, he provides them with every opportunity -- private tutors, worldwide travel, and later, the finest colleges and a large inheritance.

Jimmy also sternly disciplines his sons when they fail to live up to his expectations. His aggressive, dictatorial style of parenting, however, unlike that of Charlie Carmody, does not alienate James, Phil, and Charles. Despite the yelling and spanking, he and his sons form a tightly knit group which shares a deep mutual affection. In fact, Jack observes that the boys look up to their father in a "special kind of almost worshipping way" (65). This bond between father and sons is a product of Jimmy's oft-stated and oft-enforced credo about the benefits of family unity. As Jack notes, "Among themselves they argued as much as anybody, but this was all in the family; whenever anything outside the family came up they were all very loyal to each other and stuck together" (60). Jimmy's dual theme of achievement and unity suggests his ultimate ambition, to found a Kinsella family dynasty, what his brother calls his "own royal line," with Jimmy as the clan chieftain.

Apart from providing the historical contours of the Kinsella family, the rather lengthy flashback that opens the novel serves an important dual function. O'Connor sets up a

contrast between the two distinct branches of the Kinsella clan, one headed by John Kinsella and his son Jack which is anti-materialistic, anti-patriarchal, and estranged from any sense of the family as a cohesive and thus beneficent unit, and the other headed by Jimmy and his sons which is decidedly geared toward materialistic achievement, patriarchal authority, and family unity as a means of ensuring success. In addition, this opening segment establishes the basic conflict in the story: Jimmy's attempt to control the destinies of his sons, to fashion from the raw materials of their talent, a lasting monument to himself, a family dynasty.

Whereas the first part of the novel details the rise of the Kinsella clan, the second and longest segment, which takes place thirty years later, depicts its inevitable fragmentation and ultimate collapse. The first crack in the solid family wall had come years earlier when James, Jimmy's oldest son, entered the priesthood after his graduation from college. Jimmy had long considered James to be the brightest of his sons and the one most likely to succeed him as the head of both the family and its financial empire. His attitude toward his son's decision was predictably self-centered; he was furious at what he considered James' betrayal. As he tells Jack, "He could have been anything. Doctor, lawyer, businessman, politician: you name it. And he double-crossed me and became a priest. . . . I tell you, I raised hell when it happened. I went to the bishop and asked him if he thought we were some kind of Shanty Mick

family that had to hand over a boy a year to the Church!" (165). Jimmy's angry remarks to the bishop clearly indicate the extent to which he has tried to distance his family from the "taint" of his racial and religious origins. James had partially redeemed himself in Jimmy's eyes, however, by later becoming a world-renowned figure in the ecumenical movement, a development which suggests the degree to which the Irish clergy in America had moved beyond the narrow parochialism that had crippled Frs. Hugh Kennedy and John Carmody.

With James gone, Jimmy's hopes had centered on his two remaining sons, Phil and Charles, both of whom, it seemed, would be fit instruments for the implementation of his dream. Jack resumes part two of his narrative on the night that Charles, Jimmy's youngest son, is elected governor of the state. Several years earlier, Jimmy had come to the conclusion that the local political scene was intolerably corrupt and inefficient and, after calling a family conference, had decided, perhaps from some unarticulated sense of noblesse oblige, that one of his sons ought to step in and clean up the mess left behind by Skeffington and his band of "shanty clowns." Although they were already successful lawyers and family men with no prior interest or involvement in politics, Charles and Phil succumbed to their father's will. With Charles as the candidate, Phil as his campaign manager, and Jimmy as the financier and backstage wirepuller, they had succeeded, first in capturing the mayor's seat, and now, four years later, the governorship.

As the Kinsella clan gathers on election night, Jack realizes that they are there not so much in celebration of Charles' political victory but in observance of the family unity which made it possible. For Jimmy, the instigator and driving force behind the entire project, Charles' triumph is also his own. It is the culmination of his dream and the vindication of his values. Ironically, this election-night party marks not only the culmination but the beginning of the end of Kinsella family unity. As the celebration swirls around him, Jack senses some trouble between Charles and Phil, a small breach that will eventually widen and shatter the family forever.

The theme of family togetherness on this night hits Jack, now a moderately successful writer of mystery novels, with a special irony because he has chosen to remain aloof from his cousins' campaigns and, more important, because his wife has recently left him for another man. Jack had apparently been scarred psychologically by the suicide drowning of his mother and had withdrawn into himself, incapable of demonstrating love for fear of losing its intended object. The defense mechanism that he sets up ironically causes him to suffer the very fate it is designed to prevent: a betrayal of affection. As Jack returns home after the party, however, his wife unexpectedly calls, thereby opening the door to their eventual reunion. Thus, as one branch of the Kinsella clan moves toward a reconciliation, the other begins to disintegrate.

The climax of the novel comes when Jack's suspicion of

a rift between Phil and Charles is borne out. Phil believes that Charles has abandoned his campaign promise to radically reform state government. Instead, as Arthur Darrack points out, "Charles enacts bland, neutral legislation which does not stir up the animals, in order to gain more power for his senatorial push."[16] When Phil confronts his brother with this charge, Charles denies it, claiming that he must work within the limits of what is politically possible. An irrevocable split develops, and Phil leaves his brother's administration, threatening to expose Charles if he does not change.

A sign of Jimmy's weakening hold on his sons is the fact that he doesn't learn of the dispute until Phil resigns. When he finally discovers the conflict between his warring sons, he immediately sides with Charles. As Phil sadly acknowledges to his cousin, Jimmy's decision to back Charles is inevitable: "Charles is the great dream of the family come true -- and I'm the serpent son, sabotaging his own brother. No, he's with Charles. He has to be; his whole life says he has to be" (300).

Jimmy's blind rejection of the validity of Phil's accusations, and ultimately of Phil himself, stems not only from the threat they pose to the dream he has so long nurtured, but also from the fact that he does not understand Phil, who had not done as well as his other sons. Over the course of the years, Phil had grown bored with his legal work and had gradually given up most of his practice to rethink his career goals. Jimmy selfishly considers his son's confusion and

drift as much a betrayal as his open break with Charles. As Jimmy tells Jack, "I didn't raise anybody to be a second-rater" (169).

Despite Jimmy's bullish attempts to maintain his influence over his sons and halt the dissolution of the family, Phil carries out his attack on Charles who, in turn, retaliates with the approval of his father by having Phil committed to a mental institution. In the end, Jimmy willingly sacrifices his cherished family unity to ensure that his dream, which Charles alone now embodies, remains alive. O'Connor suggests, however, that ultimately Jimmy will fail to hold on even to Charles, who appears on the brink of assuming a position of such power that he will become impervious to any outside influence, even his father's. As Hugh Rank notes, "Charles, as the closest reproduction of his father, is on his way to usurping the old king's throne."[17]

O'Connor provides a key to the theme of his novel in a final brief exchange between Phil and his father. Anguished and bewildered by the collapse of his family, Jimmy asks, "What the hell has happened to my family?" to which Phil responds, "I don't know, Pa. I guess we all grew up" (360). Through Phil's response, O'Connor suggests that the simple process of maturation, combined with what Jones calls the "arrant individualism" of the American environment, have undermined Jimmy's patriarchal authority and crushed his dynastic ambitions.[18] One by one, as the Kinsella boys mature into adulthood, they discover that their own dreams, their own chosen paths to personal fulfillment, conflict with

those that their father has tried to impose on them. The rebellion by children against the values of their parents is a natural, but sometimes very thorny, process; in the Kinsella family, however, this passage to independent adulthood occurs at a far later age and is more corrosively bitter than might be considered normal. Rank suggests that the insularity of Kinsella family life, as it is depicted in Ireland in the first segment of the novel, sets the stage for future familial crises: "The boys play no Irish games, nor do they have Irish friends. They live in a self-contained world, even having a tutor instead of going to school. (This isolation may help explain the delayed maturation of this family later; a more typical family experiences peer-group and school influences early.)."[19] Although all of Jimmy's sons achieve success in one career or another, it is purchased at a very high price: family harmony.

O'Connor underscores his theme of the fragility of the patriarchal role in an individualistic American setting by freighting his story with heavy symbolic overtones. In fact, through the rise and fall of the Kinsella clan, he comes near to presenting an allegory of the entire Irish-American experience. The novel begins, for example, in rural Ireland where the Kinsella family is insulated from the outside world and closely united under the patriarchal authority of the father, a situation reminiscent of that which marked the peasants' life in the Ireland of the nineteenth century. O'Connor then shifts the scene to the individualistic urban environment of the United States where the patriarchal role

is steadily weakened. It is significant that the loyalty of Jimmy's sons is eroded by the greater lure of the Church and politics, the two most accessible avenues to upward mobility available to the early Irish. Like the majority of Irish-American families, the Kinsellas eventually achieve success but at the expense of the traditional family structure.

Although most of the familial relationships in O'Connor's novels are laced with tension and conflict, All in the Family ends on an optimistic note. While helplessly witnessing the disintegration of his uncle's family, Jack and his wife grow closer together. Jack has overcome his fear of intimacy, and the couple establishes a stable, working marriage. At the end of the novel, Jack reveals that his wife is pregnant, a symbol of the salutary reconstitution of Irish-American family life based not on power or the selfish pursuit of dominance, but on a symmetrical balancing of responsibilities and interests.

ENDNOTES

[1]David Dillon, "Priests and Politicians: The Fiction of Edwin O'Connor," Critique, 16 (1974), 113.

[2]Edmund Wilson, "The Great Baldini: A Memoir and a Collaboration," Atlantic Monthly, Oct. 1969, p. 65.

[3]Kate Simon, "Hurrah for What?" The Nation, 25 Feb. 1956, p. 162.

[4]Edwin O'Connor, The Last Hurrah (New York: Bantam, 1956), p. 189. All subsequent quotations from this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text by page number.

[5]Edwin O'Connor, The Edge of Sadness (New York: Bantam, 1961), p. 290. All subsequent quotations from this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text by page number.

[6]Granville Hicks, "Behind the Lace Curtains," Saturday Review, June 1961, p. 20.

[7]Hugh Rank, "O'Connor's Image of the Priest," The New England Quarterly, 41 (1968), 17.

[8]Dillon, p. 117.

[9]Edwin O'Connor, I Was Dancing (Boston: Little, Brown, 1964), p. 184. All subsequent quotations from this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text by page number.

[10]Harold C. Gardiner, "Review of I Was Dancing," America, Apr. 1964, p. 516.

[11]John V. Kelleher, "Curious Indeed the Way God Works," The New York Times Book Review, 4 June 1961, p. 1, col. 4.

[12]Julian Moynahan, "Displaced Persons," New York Review of Books, 30 Apr. 1964, p. 13.

[13]Howard Mumford Jones, "Politics, Mr. O'Connor, and the Family Novel," Atlantic Monthly, Oct. 1966, p. 120.

[14]Edwin O'Connor, All in the Family (New York: Bantam, 1966), pp. 40-41. All subsequent quotations from this novel will be noted parenthetically in the text by page number.

[15]Dillon, p. 117.

[16]Arthur Darrack, "Politics and Patriarchs," Saturday Review, Oct. 1966, p. 64.

[17]Hugh Rank, Edwin O'Connor (New York: Twayne, 1974), p. 169.

[18]Jones, p. 120.

[19]Rank, Edwin O'Connor, p. 158.

CHAPTER VIII

CONCLUSION

While it is clear that Edwin O'Connor's novels have special significance for me and other Irish Americans, it is a mistake to conclude, therefore, that he was merely an ethnic writer whose characters and themes would appeal only to a limited audience. The fact that his three major novels about the American Irish were all best-sellers would suggest that O'Connor's appeal extended far beyond the boundaries of his own ethnic constituency. In his preface to The Uprooted, Oscar Handlin, speaking of his own desire to write about the immigrants, offers another reason why O'Connor was able to reach a mass audience in the United States: "Once I thought to write a history of the immigrants in America. Then I discovered that the immigrants were American history."[1] The difficult process of acculturation, of adapting to a new environment by achieving a balance between the old and the new, that O'Connor traced in his novels about the American Irish is applicable to every ethnic minority, both in the United States and in countries throughout the world.

The specific themes that O'Connor focused on -- politics, religion, and family life -- and the characters he created to illuminate them, also possess significance beyond their

application to the American Irish. The Last Hurrah is not just the story of an Irish political boss but of politicians everywhere who galvanize their minority constituency on the basis of ethnicity to challenge an entrenched majority. Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., for example, cites the case of Indian Prime Minister Nehru who asked Ambassador John Kenneth Galbraith to suggest some books he might read while on vacation. Galbraith gave him The Last Hurrah, which Nehru later told Galbraith was "the best political novel he had ever read." Nehru's appreciation of the novel, Galbraith continued, was proof enough that O'Connor's story was an enduring one: "Some in this country have suggested that Ed O'Connor's special talent was Boston and its ethnic groups. There could be no better demonstration that his was a universal sense of the problems of political organization and leadership than this reaction of an experienced politician like Nehru."[2] The Last Hurrah might be read with profit today by Black leaders in Chicago and Cuban politicians in Miami.

O'Connor's other novels also treat themes that are universal in nature. While The Edge of Sadness, for instance, probes the crippling effect an insular parish world has on one Irish-American priest, it also deals with the omnipresent human concern with personal redemption and man's relationship to God. I Was Dancing investigates the enduring problem of how children deal with their aging parents. And All in the Family focuses on the corrosive impact of authoritarianism on the family unit and on the inevitable frictions that occur between parents and their children when the latter mature and

strike out on their own.

Despite the universality of his themes and the popularity of his novels at the time of their publication, it would be difficult today to argue that O'Connor is a major figure in American letters. All of his novels but The Last Hurrah are currently out of print, and scholarly research continues to be meagre.

In fact, in the quarter century since the publication of The Last Hurrah, a mere handful of scholars has contributed materially to the study of O'Connor's fiction. Hugh Rank's Edwin O'Connor (New York: Twayne, 1974) is the only book-length critical work to emerge. While it provides much useful information about O'Connor's personal life and his unpublished work, Rank's book consists mostly of plot summaries of the various novels. John V. Kelleher's series of articles and reviews, though perhaps a bit too uncritical, are worth reading for their perceptive comments on both O'Connor's fiction and his personality. David Dillon's article -- "Priests and Politicians: The Fiction of Edwin O'Connor," Critique, 16 (1974), 108-120 -- is a well-written and wide-ranging analysis of O'Connor's major themes and characters. In The Best and the Last of Edwin O'Connor (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. provides previously unpublished excerpts of O'Connor's unfinished novels and an introduction which evokes, through personal letters, his friend's warmth and wit. Schlesinger's introduction also offers a most incisive analysis of O'Connor's major fictional themes.

This work differs from the above in that it attempts to provide not only a detailed textual examination of the themes in O'Connor's novels, but also a discussion of those motifs as they have emerged in a purely historical context. This interdisciplinary approach points up both the accuracy of O'Connor's portrayal of Irish-American life and the creative skill he brought to bear in fashioning art from the materials of history.

There are several possible reasons why O'Connor's work has attracted the attention of so few scholars. During the height of his popularity, O'Connor remained a very private man who refused to help publicize his novels by making public appearances at book stores or on radio and television talk shows. Had he done so, he might well have become, given his engaging personality and sharp wit, a literary star and thus promoted interest in his work. Another factor is that his sudden death at age forty-nine cut short his career at the apex of his talent. Had he been able to add significantly to the five novels he had already published, he may have demanded the enduring attention of the literary scholars. O'Connor may also have been the victim simply of changing literary tastes. He was a traditionalist, rather than an innovator. He neither tinkered with the form of the novel, nor purchased his popularity by means of gratuitous vulgarity, sex, or violence. The wellspring of his creativity was not alienation or outrage, but familiarity and affection. His characters are, for the most part, staunchly middle class, and his stories focus on the concerns and aspirations of that maligned

group. He was a novelist of manners in an age when people seemed increasingly to have forgotten theirs.

It is my contention that Edwin O'Connor is a fine literary craftsman and a consummate storyteller whose novels are important enough to deserve continued academic scrutiny. Writing in the tradition of Howells, James, Wharton, and Fitzgerald, he held up a mirror to one segment of the American social scene and, in so doing, helped to illuminate the whole. He created a large gallery of vibrant, memorable characters whose stories are interesting in and of themselves and as reflections of a world in the process of change. He also brought a certain steadiness of moral vision to his novels. He viewed mankind as neither wholly good nor wholly evil; rather, he recognized, and evinced a generous sympathy for, the "shattering duality," the constant "warfare of the parts," that affects us all. There is an edge of sadness in the fact that O'Connor was not granted the opportunity to expand and share that vision.

ENDNOTES

[1]Oscar Handlin, The Uprooted (1951; rpt. Boston: Little, Brown, 1973), p. 3.

[2]As quoted in Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., ed., The Best and the Last of Edwin O'Connor (Boston: Little, Brown, 1970), p. 14.

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