

O'Connor, Frank

by Ruth Sherry

O'Connor, Frank (Michael Francis O'Donovan) (1903–66), writer, was born 17 September 1903 in Douglas St., Cork city, only child of Michael O'Donovan, labourer and sometime British army soldier, and Mary ('Minnie') O'Donovan (née O'Connor), domestic servant. He was educated in local schools to the age of 14. As a child he was taught briefly by Daniel Corkery (qv) (1878–1964), who was also a later mentor and encouraged his learning Irish. Active on the republican side in the civil war, O'Connor was interned in Gormanston in 1922. After this experience he turned against republicanism and political violence generally. Following his release he worked as a librarian in Sligo, Cork, and Dublin until 1938, from which time he concentrated on writing. He did not again live in Cork.

O'Connor began publishing short stories and translations of poems from Irish in the mid 1920s, with the encouragement of George Russell (A E) (qv) and W. B. Yeats (qv), and with the support and friendly rivalry of Sean O'Faolain (qv), another protégé of Corkery. O'Connor continued writing prolifically in these and other genres throughout his career, publishing (in some cases posthumously) about 170 stories, over 150 translations of Irish poems, two novels, four plays, two works of autobiography, six works of literary criticism and history, two travel books, one biography, and about 300 known pieces of journalism, including many reviews, as well as articles on social, political, and cultural issues. He made about 175 radio and television broadcasts in Ireland and Britain and a few in the United States.

As a writer of short stories O'Connor used Irish characters and settings almost exclusively, with a significant proportion of stories set in and around Cork. Some of his earliest stories, including the famous 'Guests of the nation', are loosely based on his experiences of the civil war and many also draw on his early life in the slums of Cork; these are among his most colourful and intense. In the 1930s his stories also explored the relationship between modern Ireland and traditional Gaelic culture, usually seen as a site of conflict and sorrow for an individual pulled between two worlds. By the 1940s he had begun to focus more on domestic middle-class life and on the romantic and marital problems of young people, while in the 1950s and 1960s especially he wrote a number of stories from the perspective of a child; these often have an identifiable autobiographical element. He also produced several stories with priests as central characters. He sometimes expanded the genre by using the same character in a number of different stories.

In his study of the short story, *The lonely voice* (1963), O'Connor expressed the belief that the typical material of the short story is what he described as 'submerged population groups' – those who in a later age would be called 'marginalised'. He is one of the most significant of the figures who established the mid-century

Irish short story as a major genre, and he can generally be classified as a realist. He was consciously concerned with narrative method, frequently preferring to use a technique employing 'the sound of a man's voice, speaking', and in this he acknowledged an affinity with traditional oral storytelling. He held that a short story should present 'news' – inherently interesting events, and a moment of decisive change. Accordingly, although he revered Chekhov and was influenced by several other continental writers, he was relatively unsympathetic to modernist and symbolist techniques. While much of his international reputation focuses on the comic element in many of his stories, an elegiac and philosophical aspect is at least as characteristic.

Major collections of stories include *Guests of the nation* (1931), *Bones of contention* (1936), *Crab apple jelly* (1944), *The common chord* (1947), *Traveller's samples* (1951), *The stories of Frank O'Connor* (1952), *More stories by Frank O'Connor* (1954), *Stories by Frank O'Connor* (1956), *Domestic relations* (1957), *Collection two* (1964), *Collection three* (1969), *The cornet player who betrayed Ireland* (1981), and *Collected stories* (New York, 1981).

Largely self-taught in languages, O'Connor achieved a mastery of Irish extending from its earliest periods to contemporary modern Irish. Occasionally he wrote or spoke in Irish, but mainly he found a felicitous outlet for his lyric impulse in translations of poetry, his own original poems being slight. His contribution in this area ranks second only to his achievement in the short story. Major collections include *The wild bird's nest* (1932), *Three old brothers* (1936), *Lords and commons* (1938), *The fountain of magic* (1939), *Lament for Art O'Leary* (1940), *The midnight court* (1945), *Kings, lords and commons* (1959), *The little monasteries* (1963), and (with David Greene (qv)) *A golden treasury of Irish poetry, AD 600–1200* (1967).

In the 1930s O'Connor became a member and later director of the board of the Abbey Theatre on the initiative of W. B. Yeats. He gave much energy to the theatre's affairs, as well as writing several plays, some in collaboration with producer Hugh Hunt (qv), although these have not become part of the standard repertoire. He resigned from the theatre after the death of Yeats. In this period he also wrote *The big fellow* (1937), a biographical analysis of Michael Collins (qv) which reflects O'Connor's changed political sympathies.

O'Connor married first (1939) Esther Evelyn Bowen Speaight, a divorced Welsh actress, daughter of Evan O. Bowen and Elizabeth Bowen (née Evans). The marriage created a difficult professional and personal situation for him in Ireland in the 1940s, as he was ostracised and refused work in many quarters, at the same time that several of his publications were banned. It was also in this period that he defended his friend the traditional storyteller Timothy Buckley (qv) and the banned book by Eric Cross (qv) based on his life and stories, *The tailor and Ansty* (1943). In the early 1940s a main source of his income came from columns written for the *Sunday Independent* under the pseudonym 'Ben Mayo'; in these he commented

critically on many aspects of Irish public life, including governmental policy on education, health, and language. He also began what was to be a lifelong campaign for the preservation of national monuments, whose neglect and decay he deplored. The same concern dominates his travel books, *Irish miles* (1947) and *Leinster, Munster and Connaught* (1950).

During the early 1940s he also served as poetry editor of and contributor to the literary, cultural, and political review *The Bell*, founded and edited by Sean O'Faolain in 1940. As O'Connor's private difficulties grew, his relationship with O'Faolain cooled. In time his awkward situation, and the war, led to his living and working mostly in England and later the United States, where he taught in several universities. His first marriage, in which he had two sons and one daughter, ended in separation in 1949 and divorce in 1953. He also had one other son, born outside wedlock during this period. O'Connor married secondly (1953) Harriet Randolph Rich, daughter of John Rich, banker, and Harriet Rich (née Gray) of Annapolis, Maryland; there was one daughter of this marriage. After his second marriage he returned to Ireland more often and reestablished a base in Dublin.

A major work of his late career was his autobiography, *An only child* (1961), covering his life up to the time of his release from internment, but focused especially on his growing up as the child of an alcoholic and sometimes brutal father and a vivacious but fastidious mother who herself, as an orphan, had suffered destitution and an institutional upbringing. *An only child* is largely a celebration of her character and spirit. This work gives the classic depiction of Cork working-class life in the early part of the twentieth century, but also provides an understanding of the many positive and negative forces that shaped O'Connor. A sequel, dealing with his later life, was left unfinished at the time of his death, although edited and published as *My father's son* (1968).

O'Connor's international reputation expanded throughout the 1950s and 1960s, not least because of his regular publications in the *New Yorker*, and his financial situation improved. At the end of his life he was regarded with esteem rather than suspicion in Ireland. He was awarded a D.Litt. (Dubl.) in 1962, partly in recognition of a series of lectures he had given which resulted in the posthumous *The backward look* (1967), the first attempt to write a literary history of Ireland covering work in both languages.

Frank O'Connor died in Dublin on 10 March 1966 and is buried in Deans Grange cemetery, Co. Dublin. A death mask is in the Pembroke Library, Ballsbridge, Dublin, and a bust by Séamus Murphy (qv) in the Cork City Library, with copies elsewhere. A charcoal sketch by Seán O'Sullivan (qv) is in the Dublin Writers Museum. Oil portraits by Norah McGuinness (qv) and by W. J. Leech (qv) (although the subject is disputed) are in private ownership. Extensive collections of O'Connor's papers are found in the libraries of the University of Florida and of Boston University, with smaller collections in TCD and the NLI. Additional letters are among the A. D. Peters

papers in the University of Texas and among the Sean O'Faolain papers in the University of California at Berkeley.

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Frank O'Connor, *An only child* (1961); idem, *My father's son* (1968); Maurice Sheehy (ed.), *Michael/Frank* (1969) (bibliog.); James Matthews, *Voices: a life of Frank O'Connor* (1984)

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