

morning. Old aunts went on shopping trips and never returned. . . . My own mother disappeared one day into her bedclothes, thinking she was better off." This is the voice of a peasant indeed, for it has the resilient fatalism of those who have learned not to expect much, here blended with Fell's characteristic deadpan wit.

This is the voice, also, of the father in "The Prophecy," who tells, "as if it were funny . . . how neighborhood kids went out to search the tracks for coal, each lump a treasure." Fell continues, mimicking his laconic ways: "Though my father is a storyteller, he has little else to say." We are left to ponder how much ever does get said, how people must choose to take the world "as if it were funny," and how little else, finally, seems worth saying. In the face of these bleak realities, Mary Fell's book treasures each lump of unsayable feeling, and recalls for us its persistent fire.

— David Graham

WILLIAM DOUGLAS O'CONNOR: WALT WHITMAN'S CHOSEN KNIGHT. By Florence Bernstein Freedman. Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1985. pp. xiv + 368.

William Douglas O'Connor's significance in American literary history begins and ends with the fact that he was among the first, after Ralph Waldo Emerson, to recognize the radical departure in politics, poetics, and human relations that Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* represented. Unlike Emerson, O'Connor championed Whitman's cause without reservation or qualification for nearly 30 years, even through a personal quarrel that separated the two men for a decade. O'Connor's advocacy produced, among other articles, the first sustained critical appreciation of Whitman's life and work; entitled *The Good Gray Poet*, it fastened upon Whitman an identifying tag that—perhaps unfortunately—has stuck to him to this day.

Although thought by his contemporaries—and by his own modern champion, Florence Bernstein Freedman—to be a writer of great talent, O'Connor never produced the original work that might have made him famous and a figure of enduring interest in American literature.

Best suited by temperament for argumentation, he was likely to precipitate himself into literary wars on the side of unpopular and defenceless authors against a complacent or persecuting establishment. This tendency served him well when he defended Whitman's poetry against the censorship of Secretary of the Interior James Harlan, who fired Whitman from his post in the Indian Bureau after discovering a copy of the third edition of *Leaves of Grass* in Walt's desk, or against the censure of Whitman's literary enemies, such as Henry Stoddard. But his ideological style of thought, which depended on simplification and overstatement for its power, failed him when he turned his hand to imaginative literature. His antislavery novel, *Harrington*, died with the issue that had given rise to it, and his stories, including one that portrayed Whitman as a Christ-like carpenter, depended on symbols and heavy-handed ornamentation to dress up conventional moral sentiments. In short, O'Connor is an interesting but minor figure in literary history, hardly the material for a full-length biography in and of himself.

Professor Freedman's book, however, is not the first full-length study of this minor figure. The first, Jerome Loving's *Walt Whitman's Champion* (1978), maintained a fairly tight focus on O'Connor's role as the defender of Whitman's literary reputation, and reprinted the essays O'Connor wrote in the cause, allowing the reader to judge for himself the value of O'Connor's critical contributions. Freedman does acknowledge that the "neglect" of O'Connor has been "partly remedied by the publication of a book about O'Connor," which she names in a footnote, but there is little practical recognition of that fact in her book itself, which repeats at length information already available in Loving. There is, of course, much new material here, some of it of interest—as, for example, her account of the abolitionist and Women's Rights movements of the 1840's and 50's through which O'Connor met both Whitman and his eventual wife, Ellen (Nelly) Tarr. But many details have only the quality of facticity, not significance, and suggest that the original reason for taking an interest in O'Connor has been forgotten.

Unless one can generate an independent interest in this "brilliant man who was representative of and participant in social and literary movements of mid-nineteenth-century America," then, one would do well to consult Loving first, and Freedman only as needed to amplify.

— Geoffrey Sill