
JUST CURIOUS: Essays. By Cullen Murphy. Houghton Mifflin. 248 pp. \$21.95

Readers of the *Atlantic Monthly* already know that one of the finer essayists of our time is that magazine's managing editor, Cullen Murphy. No matter how deeply he dips into his seemingly bottomless bag of worldly arcana—one month it may be a harrowing view of the world as seen from the Centers for Disease Control's *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report*; the next, a string of facts from the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* that helps explain why cats have replaced dogs as Americans' favorite household pet—he unfailingly fetches a gem that illuminates the world and ourselves. Humor and revelation are the touchstones of Murphy's craft. In an essay on double lives, he muses upon the impossibility of meeting the time demands of even a single life in our day: "There are occasions when, upon being interrupted politely with the words, 'Is this a bad time?' I must suppress a giddy, maniacal laugh, of the kind Herbert Lom descends into when Inspector Clouseau finally drives him over the edge." (In prose as in live performance, Murphy shows, timing is almost everything). Some of his more memorable long essays, such as his account of the scientific study of the Shroud of Turin, are not included here, but his look at the Thomas Aquinas editing industry shows his skill in the longer, expository form. This collection, indeed, adds up to something more substantial than the sum of its delightful parts. It is an oblique self-portrait—in this case, of a wry, boundlessly energetic observer who, without ever passing judgment, discerns a moral pattern behind the world's rich and surprising variousness. A curious mind, in other words, but never *just* curious.

CONOR: A Biography of Conor Cruise O'Brien. By Donald Harman Akenson. Cornell. 573 pp. \$35

ANTHOLOGY. By Conor Cruise O'Brien. Ed. by Donald Harman Akenson. Cornell. 356 pp. \$39.95

Civil servant, diplomat, essayist, politician, historian, professor, administrator, play-

wright, poet, biographer, columnist, editor, activist—Conor Cruise O'Brien has worn an astonishing number of hats in his 77 years. Most of these roles, one might note, have been quite controversial. For much of his career, according to his biographer Akenson, O'Brien has been "simultaneously the most hated man in Ireland and the most admired [Irishman] outside of it."

Whatever else may be said of O'Brien's career, its likes will not be seen again, not in this age of credentialism. Ever since he graduated from Dublin's Trinity College in 1940, a new metamorphosis every four or five years appears to have been O'Brien's rule. His career began on the parallel tracks of civil servant and writer (the latter under the pen name Donat O'Donnell). Among his public roles, he was United Nations representative in the war-torn Congo in 1961, vice chancellor of the University of Ghana (under chancellor President Kwame Nkrumah) during the mid-'60s, a member of the Irish Parliament in the early '70s, then a cabinet minister, and in the late '70s editor-in-chief of the *London Observer*. Almost every turn in his career has left in its wake a book, starting with his controversial *To Katanga and Back* (1962), which exposed the inner workings of the UN; his later Cold War polemics against anticommunist containment policies were even more controversial. For his opposition to the Irish Republican Army's terrorist campaign—and to the general romanticism of violence in Ireland—he was practically drummed out of his own country.

While not concealing his admiration for O'Brien, Akenson is frank about his subject's faults. O'Brien is, he writes, "unnecessarily combative and often egregiously arrogant," and if "the Cruiser" is O'Brien's famous nickname, he has also been called "Lunchtime O'Boozer." Yet despite the drinking and combativeness O'Brien is, Akenson claims, "the most important Irish nonfiction writer of the 20th century." This new anthology of O'Brien's writings—ranging from poems to essays on fascism, from evaluations of Yeats to reports on Biafra—certainly suggests that O'Brien is modern Ireland's most wide-ranging intelligence.

In 1992 O'Brien published *The Great Melody*, possibly his crowning literary achievement. In this admiring biography of the 18th-century