

not disabled by his own personal problems but nourished by them. His honesty will not permit him either to omit or to simplify his perplexities. And the soaring eloquence, the dazzling imagery of the *Elegies* would be nothing without this honesty.

Guardini's commentary is perceptive and probing. At times, certainly one does wish that he would be more audacious, but there is, nevertheless, no doubt at all that he has come very close indeed both to Rilke's personality and to the spirit of his poetry. If he is sometimes over-cautious in his examination of the poet's ideas, he also never forgets that a vision, however idiosyncratic its form may be, is something to be shared and experienced, not merely to be dissected and discussed.

ELIZABETH JENNINGS

THE EDGE OF SADNESS, by Edwin O'Connor; Max Reinhardt; 18s.

'This story at no point becomes my own'. The opening sentence of Mr Edwin O'Connor's new novel expresses its subtlety, told by 'the friend of the family', 'the invited intruder', who none the less sees these things happening from the recently won fortress of his own self—ruined but restored. Father Hugh Kennedy has returned to Boston—the name is never mentioned, but the place is plain—to take charge of a parish in a broken-down slum. He is middle-aged, sensitive, and wholly without illusions now. His trouble was drink, of course, but he is an infinite distance away from the whisky-priest of usual fiction. The alcoholic situation is somehow a symbol—and may it not be the unsober effect very often?—of the alienation that loneliness brings: a sacrifice which has grown flat with custom, isolated, with none to share its daily renewal. Now he has learnt to be alone.

But the story is not his, though it would be of little account if he were not there to tell it. Father Kennedy is linked by the inexorable fact of his Boston Irish upbringing with the rumbustious, brogue-joking, unscrupulously rich Charlie Carmody. Old Charlie is busy as ever with his little schemes: the great practical joker, who, as the novel opens, telephones Father Kennedy at six in the morning to invite him to a birthday party—his eighty-first, though perversely he insists that he is eighty-two. Family and friends are gathered in the hideous Victorian house, with the marble bust of Daniel O'Connell, The Liberator, in the hall ('Somebody gave it to him', Charlie's son, John, explains): it is Hugh Kennedy's first re-appearance, and there is a thrill of expectation as he refuses the sherry. Charlie's children are there—John, the successful pastor of St Paul's, cold, intransigent, driven on by contempt for all that his father embodies, Mary, the unmarried daughter who has become her father's house-keeper and convenient butt; Helen, married to a pleased-with-himself doctor; Dan, the black sheep, the remittance man with slick schemes for wealth without work. There, too, are Helen's son, Ted, and his wife and children: they reflect

the speed of the polishing process in two generations, from Charlie's rough immigrant aggressiveness to the smooth conformity that money and education have created. Old Charlie's friends have come as well, with their elaborate jokes of wakes and the good old days.

Such is the setting, rich evidently in comic possibilities and vigorously evoking the crowded life of the Boston Irish on their way up. The essential theme of the novel is Charlie's mysterious pursuit of Father Kennedy, with its pointless conversations at inconvenient moments, the unlikely encounters and the hints and half-promises. He wants to be reassured, and most of all he wants to be told that Hugh Kennedy's father, now dead, had a special regard for him. His good opinion matters more than all else, and the elder Kennedy certainly knew him better than most, 'watching him with incredulity, some amusement, a certain amount of rather reluctant admiration, and a somewhat larger amount of positive dislike'. Charlie builds up a fantasy of friendship between them that never in fact existed, and the culmination of the novel lies in Father Kennedy's equivocal reassurances when the old man lies at the point of death and when he needs that comfort most of all. It is then that Charlie, in the terrible clarity of what seems to be the end of life—characteristically, Charlie does in fact recover—reveals himself. 'There's not a man in the city to-day that's more hated than me'. And so, Father Kennedy reflects, 'what Charlie had been up to all along was nothing more than a pat on the back. A special pat on the back, to be sure : a pat on the back from my dead father. Passed on by the one possible middleman'.

So bald a summary of what *The Edge of Sadness* has to say in terms of plot does little justice to the greatness of a novel that is marked throughout by a marvellous sensibility, an awareness of the hidden areas of motive and choice. It is Charlie Carmody's story certainly, and it is told with unflinching spirit, and, one supposes, absolute fidelity to the mood of the immigrants elbowing their way to prosperity. Mr O'Connor's ear for dialogue is devastatingly exact, whether it is Hugh Kennedy's father's judgment on Charlie ('As fine a man as ever robbed the helpless') or Charlie's own brand of pious rascality. ("Old pals and the family", Charlie said. "I remember them all, day and night, in the prayers and out of them. And plenty of others as well. Busy as I am, I'm thinkin' of people every hour of the day. All kinds of people, big and small, it makes no difference to Charlie. Bankers and clerks and cops and sewer workers". There was just the slightest perceptible pause. "And priests," he said'.) And in Father Danowski, the curate at St Paul's, with his elevated English and tender heart; Bucky Heffernan and P. J. Mulcahy, with their cross-talk and tantrums; or Roy, the janitor, Mr O'Connor has created—or should one say re-created?—characters of brilliant authenticity.

But this novel is much more than the sum of its remarkable parts. It is organized with intelligence, allied to a deep understanding of the needs of the human heart. And that is so because the narrator has himself been purified—not heroically indeed, for Father Kennedy's own achievement is never dramatized

or given a spurious glamour. But his knowledge of his own loneliness, and of the roots of it, enables him to interpret the folly of others—and of the often unspoken human need that lies beneath—with an insight that is patient and true. Above all, one is amazed by the fidelity with which the priestly situation is conveyed. There is an awareness of the real fabric of a form of life that can in fiction so easily be either trivial or hysterical and in any case so rarely suggests the enduring paradox of a vocation that is in practice achieved in duties that can be tedious, among people that can be boring, and always bears the marks of a Simon Peter who was chosen not in spite of his humanity but because of it.

With *The Edge of Sadness* Mr O'Connor adds not only to his own reputation: he gives a new dimension to the American novel itself.

ILLTUD EVANS, O.P.

CATHOLIC SOCIAL ACTION IN BRITAIN 1909-1959, by J. M. Cleary ; Catholic Social Guild; 10s.

This book gives a clear picture of the history of the Catholic Social Guild from its formation in 1909 to its re-organization in 1959. One of the best features of the book is the way in which the author succeeds in bringing to life the pioneers of the social apostolate in this country. The work of the Catholic Workers College is included in the history, and we are shown something of the great effort put into their studies by the students, many of whom had left school at fourteen. Typical of the best of the early students was Tom Leyland, who served the Guild as Organizing Secretary from 1922 to 1951, and who continues to serve it as a member of its executive until his death, taking an important part, despite failing health, in the discussions preceding the 1959 re-organization.

The reader will learn too of the criticism and intrigue from which the Guild suffered in its early years from some Catholics who believed that the British Labour Party was socialist in the sense used in the papal proscription, and who believed also that much of the Guild's teaching was suspect. Let the reader draw the lesson from this unhappy phase in the Guild's history, namely the importance of free discussion in all matters where defined doctrine is not involved.

Towards the end of the book the treatment becomes less definitive. No doubt those who are still labouring in the field have been less willing to talk of their own labours than of those of their predecessors. Again, it is inevitable that, at this stage, little should be said about the details of the unfortunate crisis that led eventually to the Guild's re-organization at the end of the period under consideration. At some stage, it is desirable that a fuller account should appear, and that the subsequent history of the Guild should also be dealt with. Let us hope that when the time comes for this, the Guild will find a historian worthy of continuing the story that Mr Cleary has so ably begun.

J. M. JACKSON