

John O'Connor was born into the tight-knit community of the Mill Row, on the outskirts of Armagh, on April 3, 1920. After leaving school at 14, he worked for the Post Office as a telegram delivery boy. At around the same time, he began writing, sending stories to magazines in Ireland and America. In 1944 his story 'The Boy and the Stone' won a Best Short Story competition and was published in *The Bell*, the leading Irish literary journal of the day, edited by **Sean O'Faolain**. Encouraged, O'Connor began sending stories to the BBC in Belfast, where producer John Boyd took the young writer under his wing and O'Connor also struck up a friendship with novelist Sam Hanna Bell. Emboldened by the support of these leading lights of the Northern Irish literary world, he began work on his first novel.

Come Day – Go Day, first published by Dublin's Golden Eagle Books in 1948, returns O'Connor to his beginnings in the Mill Row, a cluster of workers' houses huddled in the shadow of the Drumcairn Spinning Mill. Though the community owes its very existence to the Mill, it functions as much as an absence as a presence in the heart of the place, and in the heart of the book, as far from providing steady work the Mill is continually closing down, leaving the inhabitants of the Row to fend for themselves. The Coyle family for their part eke out a meagre existence by running a shop out of their kitchen, and it's through their eyes, particularly those of middle boy, Neilly, that we enter the world of the book.

When it was republished by Blackstaff Press in 1984, the back cover blurb called *Come Day – Go Day* a 'gentle, evocative novel'; but evocative though it certainly is, there's nothing gentle about this book or the world it depicts. Though there is warmth in its portrayal of this small community, with neighbours juking in and out of one another's houses, the novel is fierce and unflinching in its attention to the underlying harshness of these lives, the constant struggle to keep body and soul together in the face of elemental forces – both the rain that continually threatens to flood the houses, and the Mill that both holds out and with-holds the promise of stability.

O'Connor's background as a short story writer is evident throughout; indeed the novel can read less like a unified narrative than a series of acutely observed episodes. But what might be sacrificed in terms of narrative drive is made up for by the forensic detail of the writing and O'Connor's feel for the textures of family life: its warmth, intimacies and sudden violence.

The line by line writing too is rich and assured: from O'Connor's vivid neologisms – hot water 'japping' out of the spout of a kettle, teeth 'scringing' against a bitter taste – to his unerring ear for the rhythms of everyday speech – 'Thon's a shocking place got altogether'. His characterisation meanwhile is sharp and sensitive. Take for instance new mother Teasie, hounded by the scolding presence of her mother-in-law and belittled by her own weak-willed husband. What seems at first almost like a portrait of post-natal depression reaches a peak of intensity in the extraordinary chapter eight, which plays out like an inverted small town Irish *Doll's House*: ordinary life as tragedy.

If this combination of the intimate and the epic puts one in mind of other great Irish short story writers of the mid-century – including John O'Connor's namesake Frank – his is a distinctively Northern voice: indeed the novel's setting in the industrial edgelands of a small

town brings to mind other, later Northern writers, albeit from the North of England: Alan Sillitoe, say, or Barry Hines.

For this is as much an urban as a rural novel. The characters live in an in-between place, cheek by jowl with the Asylum, the inmates of which become figures of both fun and fear for the children of the Row. Turn one way and you're in town, with its cinemas and fish and chip shops and pubs; turn the other and you're in the country, with the river and the cow-fields and the wild shamrock. This urban / rural bifocalism is part of a system of dualities at work in the book. Another is the local versus the wider world.

Though the focus of the novel is tight and intent – one small community on the edge of one small town – there are glimpses of further horizons. Uncle Pachy has spent seven years serving in the British Army in India and Neilly and his friends are entranced by the cinema, especially the exploits of Western heroes like Tom Mix and Ken Maynard. So while the loyalties of the characters tend to be local – ‘Show us what the ould Row’s made of’ they urge their bullet-throwing champion Macklin – the wider world is never far away.

And it was this wider world that exerted a pull on John O’Connor, drawing him away from Ireland in 1952, first to England and ultimately to Australia, where he died in Townsville, Queensland in 1960, of peritonitis. He was only 39.

We do not know if he was still writing in those last years. A late letter to Sam Hanna Bell hints at a book of travel writing. But nothing survives. We are left with a couple of dozen short stories, some journalism and radio scripts – and this one novel, this gem of a book.

And now here it is again, reissued for the twenty first century, once more making its case for John O’Connor, in the words of Sam Hanna Bell: ‘to be considered one of the most talented and delightful of our writers’, a case that is ‘as substantial as the cathedrals above his native city.’

by *Daragh Carville*, November 2016

This is a longer version of the foreword to the new edition of *Come Day – Go Day* published in 2016 in a limited edition by the **John O’Connor Writing School** and the **Arts Council of Northern Ireland**.