

BOOK REVIEW

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A Long Desire by Evan S. Connell. The North Point Press, 1988.

EVAN S. CONNELL, whose collection of historical essays, *A Long Desire*, has been re-released by The North Point Press, belongs to that curious group of authors whose work is both respected and ignored. In a recent profile of Evan S. Connell in the journal *Ploughshares*, Gerald Shapiro describes a career of hard work, praise, and obscurity. During the past thirty years Connell has written good books, over ten of them—six novels, three collections of short fiction, and two volumes of poetry—and they were well reviewed. But his career never reached commercial critical mass, and by the nineteen sixties, Connell, then in his forties, was no longer able to support himself with his writing, and he took a job with the California State Unemployment office.

Connell achieved commercial and critical success in 1959 with his first novel, *Mrs. Bridge*, a semi-autobiographical portrait of an affluent, mid-western matron. *Mrs. Bridge* is a masterful work of realism, a midwestern *Madame Bovary*, with the detached irony and dreamlike clarity of Sherwood Anderson's *Winesburg, Ohio* or Frank Conroy's *Stop-Time*. In *Mrs. Bridge*, Connell begins to explore what will prove to be a lifelong preoccupation with authenticity—of how our desire to become something more than we are, something real, takes us a half-step out of life into the willy-nilly dream worlds his characters inhabit.

His 1966 novel, *The Diary of a Rapist*, is one of the best of these portraits, and its protagonist, Earl Summerfield, has been compared with Dostoyevsky's Raskolnikov. But *The Diary of a Rapist* doesn't have the seduction of *Crime and Punishment*. Earl Summerfield's misogyny is

apparent and repelling early in the book, and his character dominates the novel, without hope.

Which might have something to do with why Connell's fiction gets great reviews and doesn't sell—sometimes his portraits are excruciatingly real and a little harsh—and the upturn of Connell's fortunes with his recent non-fiction offerings. In his histories and essays, released from the constraints of realism he places on himself in his novels, a little bit more of Connell comes through in the telling.

In *The Son of the Morning Star*, Connell's long rumination on the conflicting ambitions and dizzy schemes of the American West, and their fruit of slaughter, Connell embraces his characters' delusions, almost celebrates them. The myth which surrounds Custer (a tall tale which Custer did his utmost to perpetuate) becomes a part of the story, the fantasy which propelled the Seventh Cavalry into a muddle of death at the Little Bighorn.

Since the success of *Son of the Morning Star*, The North Point Press has begun re-releasing Connell's early books. The Bridge novels are fine reads, and stand with *The Diary of a Rapist*, *The Connoisseur*, and his book-length poems, *Notes from a Bottle Found on the Beach at Carmel* and *Points for a Compass Rose*, as his best creative work.

But Connell gained his wider audience with non-fiction, and *A Long Desire*, a collection of historical essays re-released this year, exhibits the same wit and vision of *Son of Morning Star*. The eleven essays in *A Long Desire* are loosely organized by their common subject—the tendency of adventurers through the ages to leave comfortable lives in the face of unknown dangers to see what they can see, and Connell's curious relation to their exploits. In "Various Tourists," Connell describes his fascination,

In 1939, when Richard Halliburton tried to cross the Pacific in a Chinese junk, I was a fourteen year old stamp collector. Never doubting he would make it, I paid something like \$1.50 to have him deliver a commemorative envelope. It seems to me that he was supposed to hand cancel the stamp to authenticate each letter he was carrying. It's been a while, but I remember how I felt when that junk was overdue, annoyed and resentful. I wanted my commemorative envelope. I remember being uncomfortable with my attitude, nevertheless it was so; Halliburton's life, I could not deny, meant less to me than a letter he was carrying.

These were the adventures which fascinated Connell as a boy, growing up in the stultifying atmosphere he parodies in *Mrs. Bridge*. The essays in *A Long Desire* are concerned not so much with the adventures themselves, but with the passions which inspired the likes of Marco Polo, Cortes, Coronado, and lesser-known explorers like Ibn Batuta, the fourteenth-century Arab whose travels made "the journey of Marco Polo look like a walk around the block," or the Greek Pytheas, who purportedly discovered Iceland, "Thule," four hundred

years before the birth of Christ, and the armchair investors who cheered them on and funded them.

All of the essays are characterized by Connell's firm voice, brisk pacing, and his eye for irony and detail. In "The Sea Must Have an Endynge," Connell recounts the fated journeys of Cabot, Frobisher, and Hudson in their search for the Northwest Passage. Funded by greedy investors, fueled by their desire to find what Frobisher called "the only thing of the world that was left undone and whereby a notable mind might be made famous and fortunate," the explorers and their crews end up, one after another, stuck in the ice which blocks the passage. It wasn't until 1903 that the Norwegian Amundsen finally skirted through the passage with six men in a small herring boat, the first to make the passage, with the possible exception of the HSS Octavius, which Connell suggests navigated the passage in 1762, but not in the style or direction we might expect. In 1775, fourteen years later, the captain of another ship spotted the Octavius mired in an iceberg west of Greenland, whereupon boarding the Octavius, he found preserved the frozen crew, and a log detailing their departure from San Francisco, and their mounting problems with ice.

The haunting vision of the Octavius—the failed efforts of expeditions—are a common theme in the essays; fired by some lie or misapprehension, the overloaded and misinformed adventurers are most often thwarted after unknowingly stumbling onto some unrecognized treasure.

The essays in *A Long Desire* explore the desires which fuel the truths we create, Coronado's seven cities of gold, always "just a little farther north" in the prairies of Kansas, or the quite fabulous "Prester John." A mysterious letter to the Pope in 1165 describes him:

... the Great Khan's daughter [was] his wife. Twelve archbishops attended him, who were themselves mighty lords. His chamberlain was a king. His cupbearer was a king. His steward was a primate and a king. His marshal was a king and archimandrite. Beneath his banner lay seventy-two kingdoms whose monarches, each utterly subservient, ruled several lesser Kings. (75)

Despite the dubious authenticity of this resume, emissary after unlucky emissary was sent to search for Prester John, "because bad news kept trickling out of Asia and [a couple of Popes thought] it would be helpful to get in touch with Prester John" (82).

But the essays aren't simple histories. Although *A Long Desire* is supplemented with a bibliography of over a hundred book-length references, the essays aren't footnoted, and are packed with so many details, turns, and wry asides, that they read like surrealistic dramas rather than documented stabs at the truth. Connell presents so many contradictory explanations that he seems to be challenging the readers to pick their own truths. You get the feeling that Connell might swap

beers and talk with you about it if you cared to read all the references and make a better stab than he did; that he would be delighted, rather than disturbed, to swap theories.

Because it is the tales themselves which dominate *A Long Desire*, the element of storytelling is an important part of Connell's narration. Like a Red Smith column, his accounts begin to take on a life of their own, removed from the related event. Connell celebrates the self-aggrandizement of his adventurers' tales with an incredulous tone which evolves into something like adoration, which all adds to the curious, self-reflexive quality of these essays.

In "The Aztec Treasure House," Connell explores the hidden desires which drove him to purchase a piece of Olmec pottery, the cracked figure of a woman's form, etched during thousands of years in the soil by innumerable root coils. After involved descriptions of the Olmec culture, artistic tradition, and his own piece, which seems to justify his admiration and purchase of the figure, Connell finds himself faced with a less enthusiastic neighbor's troubling question, "Why did you buy it?," which sends Connell on a self-investigative search of why we value what we value.

Connell finds the answer in a San Francisco flea market.

I recognized the book from a distance, long before I read the title. It was "The Aztec Treasure House," and adventure book for boys. I had checked it out from my high school library at least four times. . . . I have tried several times to re-read it, but I cannot get very far. . . . Skipping across half remembered pages, I come to these lines: "Hello, Professor!," Young called out, "have you found any antiques?"

It is the same theme Connell explores in his novel, *The Connoisseur*—the obscure desires which possess us to do what we do and believe what we believe, and their unlikely conclusions. None of the adventurers in *A Long Desire* seem to find what they went looking for, although they find quite a bit else. As Connell explains in "Various Tourists," "I have come to realize that certain people do not travel the way most of us travel; not only do they sometimes choose odd vehicles, they take unusual trips for incomprehensible reasons."

And even after the most fantastic journeys, the receptions back home seem mixed. Those with the most remarkable tales seem to be the ones who are beheaded, exiled, or sent right back out again into the wilderness from which they came. The Victorian explorer Mary Kingsley's insistence,

that African Society was as meticulously structured as European society; that missionaries were doing more harm than good; that traders were not villainous swindlers taking advantage of childlike natives; and that taxing a man's property, such as his hut, outraged the African's sense of justice,

fell upon deaf ears, perhaps because it was not what the British

government wanted to hear, and Mary Kingsley, being a woman, was not at all who they wanted to hear it from.

“As to Pytheas. After his tremendous trip he was ridiculed—which does sometimes happen to story tellers,” Connell laments in “Various Tourists.” But not always. As a young man, Connell set out to reach his readers through brilliant fictional realism. But in his histories and essays, he appears to have found a much more fruitful route.