
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

conservative Edmund Burke, O'Brien astonished many critics by having located a soulmate in such a staunch defender of the status quo. But O'Brien argued that Burke's ragings against the abuses of power in France (and in England) were evidence that he was a liberal, in the oldest and best sense of the world. Burke and O'Brien are, in fact, distant kinsmen, and, beyond blood ties they are related by being early and late examples of that now-dying breed—the public intellectual who believes that ideas matter in political life.

Science & Technology

JOURNEY TO THE ANTS: A Story of Scientific Exploration. By Bert Hölldobler and Edward O. Wilson. Harvard. 228 pp. \$24.95

Looking for an exciting new career? How about myrmecology?

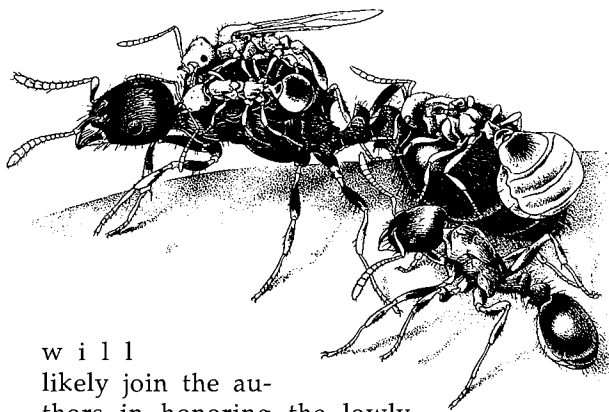
The humble ant occupies anything but a humble place in the world's ecosystems. "If all the ants somehow disappeared," Hölldobler, a physiologist at Germany's University of Würzburg, and Wilson, an entomologist and sociobiologist at Harvard University, write, the effect would be "catastrophic. Species extinction would increase even more over the present rate, and the land ecosystems would shrivel more rapidly." Without ants to collect and recycle the detritus of animal and vegetable matter, they explain, "the world would rot. As dead vegetation piled up and dried out, narrowing and closing the nutrient cycles, other complex forms of vegetation would die, and with them the last remnants of the vertebrates." Think about that the next time you squash an ant on your kitchen floor.

Hölldobler and Wilson's earlier, Pulitzer Prize-winning *The Ants* (1990) was an attempt to distill everything currently known about the family *Formicidae*, and immediately established itself as the pre-eminent work in the field. Unfortunately its dense technical language may have daunted the average reader, and here the

two myrmecologists attempt to enlist nonscientists in the study and preservation of these wondrous insects.

Ants have been around since dinosaur days—that is, roughly 60 million years. Conservative estimates place their number today at 10 thousand trillion, distributed among tens of thousands of species. Ants are tiny in everything but sociobiological complexity. They communicate, for example, by releasing a medley of chemical-based substances from different parts of the body that register alarm, attraction, the discovery of food, and a diversity of other signals. "Ants, like humans," the authors write, "succeed because they talk so well." Collectively, each colony functions as a kind of "warrior state," in which "organized conflict among colonies of the same species is far more frequent than human war." Various species employ "propaganda, deception, skilled surveillance, and mass assaults singly or in combination to overcome their enemies." Their behavior is strikingly varied: African weaver ants form chains of their own bodies to cross wide gaps between leaves, while honeypot ants climb on top of each other when fighting to gain a size advantage.

At the end of this *Journey*, many readers



w i l l likely join the authors in honoring the lowly ants: "For a while longer at least, they will help to hold the world in balance to our liking, and they will serve as a reminder of what a wonderful place it was when first we arrived."