

deserves our respect.

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The Roots of Indulgence

by Karina Rollins

The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families
by James Q. Wilson
New York: HarperCollins;
274 pp., \$25.95

James Q. Wilson, the esteemed social scientist, should be loved by liberals: He is deeply concerned with root causes. While the title of his latest work, *The Marriage Problem: How Our Culture Has Weakened Families*, suggests otherwise, the book is not just another screed about how the 60's destroyed the family. In fact, Wilson says, the 60's in this respect were but the culmination of centuries of developments.

The tragic state of the black family in America (more than half of American black children are reared by an unmarried mother) and the frightening speed at which white families are catching up (one in five white children lives without a father) are well documented. Wilson lists every social pathology believed to result from single-parent families: higher school drop-out rates, greater risk of drug abuse, teen sex, illegitimate children, increased delinquency. Few people still deny the effects family life has on a child's well-being, but seemingly even fewer can agree on the cause of this social disaster, which, as Wilson notes, has resulted in "two nations" living in one country.

Those interested in historical background and explanations will find this book compelling. Wilson digs deep, going back as far as the Magna Carta, and readers will learn more than perhaps they ever wished to know about old English marriage customs and the role of the hoe

in the family life of various African clans. And he is at pains to address any and every issue that relates to the state of marriage and family.

At times, however, Wilson goes overboard, expounding on large and obscure studies alike, as well as minutiae about such subjects as low birth weight and infant mortality or male preferences in female beauty. ("Men also like slender waists; to be exact, a waist-hip ratio of roughly 0.7.") Wilson explains that men prefer young, attractive women because youth and health are indicators of fertility and that women prefer men with ample income because the amount of money a man earns indicates his ability to provide for a wife and children. But these are indicators for the basis of *attraction* between the sexes, which, given the devastating prevalence of teen mothers, absent fathers of multiple children, venereal disease, one-night stands, abortion, and abandoned women, is clearly one factor that is *not* in decline.

And Wilson can be excruciatingly repetitive. This within a single paragraph:

men, who value sex, wish to be certain of the paternity of their children. . . . the man wants to be certain that a child born to a woman he has impregnated is really his. . . . men wish to be certain of their paternity . . .

Reading Wilson's book is often like sitting through a Philip Glass concert.

Wilson finally settles on what he considers the two main roots of the family's historical decline: slavery and the Enlightenment. Under slavery, marriage was forbidden, and family members were a master's property and could be sold at any time, from which black women learned not to rely on the presence of a man. Even when long-lasting monogamous unions were formed, a black man could neither provide for nor protect his family. Long after slavery ended, discrimination prevented most blacks from owning land or holding decent jobs, thereby continuing to rob black men of the power to be true heads of their families. The Enlightenment, Wilson argues, placed individual rights above the interests of the community and came to enshrine the notion of a right to personal happiness and fulfillment, which gradually led to the lax attitude toward divorce and unwed motherhood that reigns today.

But Wilson qualifies both the effects of

slavery and his indictment of the Enlightenment. He notes that slavery ended one-and-a-half centuries ago. And while the case can be made that blacks still face discrimination to a degree, Wilson points out that much of it has been overcome and that Mexican immigrants, who confront prejudice as well and generally have lower incomes, have a far higher marriage rate and a better record on family unity than do blacks. These facts will not please those who seek to blame American society for the plight of much of the black population.

And, despite all the damage done to families, and for all his reproaches to selfish individualism, Wilson places himself firmly in the modernist camp. "Would you ignore the Enlightenment, with all that it has meant in terms of economic growth, political freedom, scientific invention, and artistic imagination?" he asks. Wilson will disappoint antedivorce purists, for, while he lays the blame for the decay of marriage at the feet of no-fault divorce laws, he also believes that, "Obviously, some married couples should get a divorce, even if a child feels hurt." His ideal is "to find, somehow, the optimum number of divorces."

Since ending slavery has not saved the black family, and repealing the Enlightenment to save the white family is not an option, just what does Wilson propose? He runs through the litany of various public programs and how they have had little or no effect on the family problem. Society has changed so dramatically, so entrenched is the open acceptance of casual cohabitation and out-of-wedlock childbearing, of the idea that government money is a right. Is there any way back from the abyss? Can a culture of responsibility ever be restored?

Wilson believes that it can, since, he claims, it has happened once before. Queen Victoria ascended the throne at a time when both England and America "were experiencing a profound social erosion." In the early 1840's, "there was a sharp increase in crime and illegitimacy." Yet, "despite rapid industrialization, massive urbanization, the emergence of a factory-based working class, and (in America) high rates of immigration . . . both America and England became safer." "In England, the illegitimacy ratio fell sharply between 1860 and 1900." Why? "The answer, it seems, is that bourgeois morality gained an extraordinary ascendancy owing mostly to private efforts." How?

The Young Men's Christian Association, Sunday schools, religious revivals, church membership, and temperance movements became the order of the day. Their goal was character and their reach was extraordinary.

The Victorian era was not, Wilson makes clear,

as we sometimes think today, merely a stuffy and hypocritical effort to adopt the façade of dubious middle-class life, but in fact a massive private effort to inculcate self-control in people who were confronting the vast temptations of big-city life.

Other cultural forces, propelled by the upheaval of two world wars, undid the Victorian achievements. That doesn't, however, mean that today's values must remain permanent fixtures of Western life. What we need today, Wilson argues, "is a powerful cultural reassertion of the value of marriage." He wisely cautions that "restoring that value is not something that can be done by public policy." How to do it, Wilson admits, is not at all clear. But he does know that the goal can only be reached "by families and churches and neighborhoods and the media, not by tax breaks or government subsidies."

Wilson ends with one bit of tangible advice: "Our task is to teach our children . . . by insisting on a simple rule: Do not

have children before you are married." The Victorians "thought that people had a fallible human nature that would often lead them to choose self-indulgence over self-restraint." We have been suffering the consequences of living in a time of self-indulgence and of forgetting what to teach our precious, fallible children.

Karina Rollins is senior editor at the American Enterprise.

The Life You Save

by J.O. Tate

Flannery O'Connor: A Life

by Jean W. Cash

Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press; 356 pp., \$30.00



There have been dozens of books and hundreds of articles written about Flannery O'Connor (1925-64) in America alone, and considerable attention from overseas as well. Indeed, R. Neil Scott's new *Flannery O'Connor: An Annotated Reference Guide to Criticism* describes 3,297 books, articles, dissertations, and master's theses by 2,474 different authors. Though she died at age 39, O'Connor (perhaps like Poe and Chopin) made an extraordinary impact that is still felt.


Her posthumous publications (stories, essays, reviews, letters, addresses) and the film renderings of her works have greatly extended her presence, while the publication of her collected works in a volume of the Library of America in 1988 perhaps fixed her reputation. She was the second woman so honored (Edith Wharton was the first), and the first born in the 20th century. Riffing through all the pages of that library, we may well conclude that, word for word, the O'Connor volume is the single most distinguished in the entire series. Toughski luckski, Edith. *Tant pis*, Henry James.

Owing to the explosive nature of her fiction, much of the attention that O'Connor has received has been either perplexed or indignant. Sensitively attuned to the *Zeitgeist*, O'Connor set herself against it insofar as it contradicted the theological depth she knew from her Catholic faith. That faith, as she emphasized, was not merely a given but was always under construction. One of the merits of Jean Cash's biography is to show how open O'Connor was to experience and to people.

The very notion of a biography of O'Connor, however, is striking for several reasons. Hers was a life in which, ostensibly at least, there was a lot that didn't happen. The lupus that she developed early on, and the drugs she took for it, kept her at home. Since marriage was out of the question, she formed a domestic partnership with her mother and was devoted not so much to her work as to the cultivation of her vision. And this leads to another reason why a biography should be remarkable.

The Habit of Being, the edition of O'Connor's letters as edited by Sally Fitzgerald and published in 1979 pre-empted a biography to a large degree. In themselves, the letters amounted to an epistolary autobiography, and some have even thought that volume to be O'Connor's greatest work. And there is yet another "lion in the path," as Henry James put it: For years, Sally Fitzgerald assembled information toward an authorized biography, but that project was incomplete at her death in 2000, and its future is unclear. Jean Cash, who thus worked as an unauthorized biographer, has done much in terms of scholarship and interviews to flesh out her portrait of Flannery O'Connor.

To her credit, she has gotten right some essential points that needed to be clarified. One is that Flannery O-Con-

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