Reviews

THE PRIEST WHO SAW IT ALL

Russell W. Gibbons

_Fighter With a Heart: the Writings of Charles Owen Rice, Pittsburgh Labor Priest_
Edited by Charles McCollester

Those who can remember Pittsburgh’s recent industrial past will have memories of the red sky when steel was being poured at the long-gone J & L blast furnaces hugging the Parkway and the Monongahela River between downtown and Oakland. It was a time when commercial airline pilots set their course on the ribbons of steel that lit up the three rivers. By the early 1980s, those symbols of industrial glory became part of a romanticized past.

Sadly, many of the giants who walked the paths made by the captains of steel, coal, and manufacturing, and the leaders of the workers in those sectors, also recede into the post-industrial limbo. Just as some prudents would declare that “making things” is redundant, so would those people who characterized the period be shelved into obscurity. When the fires of the mills were banked, it seemed to mock the ballad of the workingman’s heaven.

_The mill was made of marble_
_The machines were made out of gold_
_And nobody ever got tired_
_And nobody ever got old_

That was the favorite of Phillip Murray, who went into the pits of the Hazelkirk mine in Castle Shannon south of Pittsburgh as a boy of 14, accompanying his father, as was custom and necessity in that first decade of this century. In time, he would rise through the ranks of the United Mine Workers, becoming a rival to the legendary John L. Lewis, who would lead the successful campaign to break the closed shop in the steel industry and then to become president of the Congress of Industrial Organizations, the CIO. The boy from Castle Shannon, denied a formal schooling but with a workingman’s intelligence, would become a confidant of FDR and Harry Truman.

According to labor historian Irving Bernstein in _The Turbulent Years_ (1974), Murray was a leader “who possessed uncommon gifts, retained the common touch” which workers instinctively understood. He said that “one of his close friends was the outspokenly progressive Father Charles Owen Rice.” Murray, dead now 45 years, was just one of the “players” who came into contact with Rice during an exciting time. He is now a retired parish priest living in the rectory of St. Ann’s in Castle Shannon, in the shadow of the 90-foot bell tower erected near Murray’s grave by his beloved steelworkers.

Rice was literally present at the creation of America’s industrial union movement in the 1930s, and when Democrats reclaimed Pittsburgh and its industrial towns in the first years of the New Deal, he was part of that action and successive waves of postwar political movements. He was involved in the “Red scare” of the ’50s, the civil rights revolution, the anti-war surge during Vietnam, and the internecine conflicts that dismembered America after Watergate. For fully six decades of the American experience, Charles Owen Rice has been a participant, sharing fully the action and passion of those times.

Several years ago in an essay in _The Critic_, Rice put his Irish roots into perspective, and the seemingly unlikely seedbed of dissent within his Catholic upbringing. “My family background helped to make me a bit of a rebel,” he wrote. “[T]hey were a devout Catholic family who produced four priests in two generations, but did not hesitate to disagree with priests and bishops on secular matters.” In 1932, after his emigration to Pittsburgh and education at Duquesne University and the seminary, he recalled the Great Depression:

_I remember going to the teeming classrooms at St. Agnes school and reflecting sadly that one-fourth to a third of those kids would spend their lives on relief. And well they might have been but for the energizing effect of World War II and the preparations for it. With one exception, these were white kids... Thus would Rice, with the gifts of observation and writing, begin to chronicle the actions of much of the remainder of the century as he saw it from his not-so-parochial vantage point. He became a regular columnist for the weekly _Pittsburgh Catholic_, and he is still there today inciting many of the devout to scowl in their pews on Sunday, and many others to approving nods. In a sense, Charles Owen Rice would become to Pittsburgh what the late newspaper columnist Herb Caen was to San Francisco: he knew how to love the town by embracing its diversity, by walking its picket lines, by pricking its conscience, and by never taking politicians — or himself — too seriously. He utilized the double Irish gift of gab and humor._

All this has been preserved for us under covers as _Fighter With a Heart: the Writings of Charles Owen Rice, Pittsburgh Labor Priest_, an amazing collection of Rice columns and contributions spanning well over half a century. It was edited skillfully and with feeling by Charles McCollester, a labor relations professor at Indiana University. 

Russell W. Gibbons taught labor history at Penn State and CCAC and was communications director of the United Steelworkers of America.
University of Pennsylvania, who prides his grievance chairmanship at the former Switch and Signal in Swissvale as he does his academic achievements. A Rice watcher for many years, McCollester brings the book alive with selections that were on final cut lists from literally thousands of columns and articles.

To many in labor and politics, and perhaps especially the church, Rice was that “troublesome priest.” At a book event last November in the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center’s Great Hall, he was surrounded by political and community dignitaries, and seemed a solitary figure reflecting on the times of that era. Rice let others tell of his six decades in the trenches — in the formation of the CIO during the New Deal years, the postwar struggles in labor with domestic Stalinists, the civil rights revolution, the Vietnam war protests, and the new wave of job losses (“downsizing”) which has dominated the 1990s.

“Never tire of protesting,” he always said, and true to his injunction, he has made symbolic appearances in recent years with striking newspaper workers, dismissed nursing home employees, and the aid organization for political prisoners in Northern Ireland. He started picketing in 1932 with his own group, the Catholic Radical Alliance, a local imitation of Dorothy Day’s Catholic Worker. The old monsignor, still combative at 87, later would smile when Catholic peace activist Molly Rush — who has jail time on her vita for invading cold war nuclear centers — related the discomfort of the mayor at the podium with the assemblage of Rice comrades-in-arms.

Cliff Caldwell told of being a clerk at an A & P in 1937 and going to the priest, who then had become identified with the CIO, and asking him, “Father, how do I make a union?” He listened to Rice’s instructions, and the Meatcutters came to Pittsburgh and soon had 8,000 members. There were other labor allies of the priest at the event, including steel union rebels who had been victims of the demolition of their once-dominant industry in Pittsburgh and its mill town suburbs throughout the ’80s. Steelworker President George Becker said, “Labor history is his history. Father Rice has been our conscience and his is an imprint that can never be erased.”

The photos in McCollester’s book recall the “labor priest” marching with Martin Luther King, Jr., Stokely Carmichael, H. Rap Brown, Benjamin Spock, and others who gave direction to the rights and peace movement that forever changed American politics. He was there in the life and times of the nation’s journey from FDR’s New Deal to Reagan’s counter-revolution and beyond. His priest colleague at the Bishops’ conference, George Higgins, called him “a towering figure... there has never been anyone like him... and there won’t be for a long time to come.”

“Charlie Rice knew how to outrage those in the church,” offered a fellow cleric, “and he did it well.” Writing for over 60 years, Rice is the acknowledged senior columnist in the Catholic press and the longest one on the Pittsburgh scene. His columns recall “the cold fury” of the top administrative nun at Pittsburgh’s Mercy Hospital during a unionization drive as well as the disappointment of many in the church when he appeared with striking grave diggers: “Pray for the dead,” he declared, quoting Mother Jones, “but fight like hell for the living!” Running for city council, befriending convicts, and being president of the local Americans for Democratic Action and ACLU did not endear him to many.

“God forgive me for saying that... I outlived them all,” Rice says, and he has — friends and enemies, clerics and bishops, politicians good and bad, leftists and reactionaries — for better than half a century. “The Lord hears the cry of the poor,” he wrote in a column last year, “and so should we... there is a class war raging in this country, but it is being waged not by the poor, but against them....” His comments were directed not only at Newt Gingrich, but also at Bill Clinton.

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Philip Scranton is Melvin Kranzberg Professor of History at Georgia Institute of Technology, and director of the Center for the History of Business, Technology, and Society at the Hagley Museum and Library.