SHE LOVED ME ONCE
And Other Stories.
By David Willis McCullough.
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HE Irish Club — officially the Ancient Order of Hibernians, Division 9 — on Pittsburgh's Oakland Avenue locked its doors for the last time in 1965, but Lester Goran has been keeping it alive in memory, first in a 1996 collection of stories called "Tales From the Irish Club" and now in a longer — and looser — collection, "She Loved Me Once."

To hear him tell it, nothing about the place was grand. There was a long bar, a dance floor, lots of tables, and once — briefly — a shadowy shape appeared on the greenish-gray walls that some swore was the face of the Virgin Mary. The club was up two steep flights of stairs that could be treacherous at closing time but deterred no one. The whole neighborhood seemed to belong, including a few sympathetic Jews. For those who weren't members, a $2 guest fee was usually good for a month for anyone "steadily enough of gilt to make it to the bar." The place had its small cadre of regular daily drinkers, but everyone seemed to climb the stairs for a couple of beers on Friday or Saturday night, maybe to dance to the Maroko brothers' three-piece band (until it was replaced by a jukebox after the war), but always to talk and end up saying a good deal more than was intended.

Goran, who still has his 1949 membership card, says in the introduction to his new book that he learned to write by listening to all that hoozy talk at the Irish Club. He grew up with Irish neighbors and told stories about his friendship with Isaac Bashevis Singer to his credit, he is not simply an eavesdropper with a good memory. The 20 stories in "She Loved Me Once," set mostly in the 1940's and 50's and peppered with timeworn historical artifacts, are funny and sad and always clear-eyed portraits of people who fully expect — in spite of all their wildest dreams — to fail.

The crowd at the Irish Club bar — men with nicknames like Pal, Fingers, Grand and Oatsie — identify not with the successful Pittsburgh Steelers but with the bumbling Pirates. They boast of getting rich hitting against the baseball team because "the Pirates were like life, sure to turn out more loser than winner." The hedge against despair is always a good story. In "Evenings With Right Racklin," a lonely lawyer finds comfort on the anniversary of his father's death in a bartender's reminiscences about the old man, even though it's soon obvious that the one being remembered so fondly is someone else entirely. It's the stories themselves that count and are missed.

And there's no lack of good stories involving, however tangentially, the Irish Club crowd. There's the one about the ghost of Billy Harpe, who liked to play Eddy Howard's recording of "To Each His Own" on the jukebox. And what about the ghost — or whatever it was — of young Father Cuthill, who regularly visited the bedroom of Doris Ward, a cashtier at Schrafft's? On the second night of the spirit world of the club and a mother observes: "It's either ghosts leaping about and howling on their mysterious business or nothing here at all down below but wind and snow. Now, give me a ghost every time."

There's the title story about Barry Whalen, who married a woman he considered ugly and couldn't understand why he hadn't earned the right to be loved forever. Or the one about the two old ladies who try to find a prostitute for a 71-year-old widower. Or the tale of how Sly, Buster and Clancy went out to join what they were told was the police union and ended up picketing a cemetery. Not all the stories are tied directly to the Irish Club. One of the best, "The Redeemer of Sobo," has almost nothing to do with the place but tells what happens after a perfectly regular everyday club night in a Jewish kid's world — part of town picks up a bad reputation (and the attention of a street evanghist) when a stranger is killed on its doorstep.

Although all the stories share a common setting in Irish Pittsburgh, the plots don't intersect. Yet some characters, club regulars, become familiar. Pat Mahoney, educated by the Jesuits, is always in search of a theological argument. Bill Cary, the local Democratic Party boss, can solve most problems with a phone call, but even he knows that Stevenson ("Adlai! I never heard such a name and neither did anyone else") hadn't a chance in the world against Eisenhower. Goran is a Jewish kid who beat drunk drunks in the club as an under-age-teen-ager and is a major object of Pat Mahoney's theological inquiries.

Many of the most appealing stories, the most colloquial and seemingly the most informal, are narrated by Clifton, who can probably be accepted as the rep's voice outside the club. As a Jew, Clifton is an outsider — an exotic, even — who can watch, listen and report without having to take sides. In "The Big Snow," he listens, probably not for the first time, to the story about three unlikely people who were snowbound overnight together in the club during The Blizzard of 1932. A priggish young man home from Notre Dame, an alcoholic bag lady and a wispy teetotaler. It sounds all too much like the beginning of a shaggy dog story. When put on the spot and asked for his opinion on a disagreement that broke out among the odd trio, he answers, "I sympathize with everybody there."

That is his — and Goran's — strength as a narrator: sympathy with a sly sense of humor and a refusal to judge.

"She Loved Me Once" is twice as long as the much-admired "Tales From the Irish Club." It's less elegant, more raffish, more lackadaisical. Both collections are unabashedly old-fashioned, while at the same time avoiding the smarmy pit of retro-jazz. The people in the present are bar-room portraits: bizarre, full of hidden possibilities, grim beneath their jaunty surface and ultimately stronger on suggestion than depth. They are mellow and well worn, as though polished by years of retelling. To read them is to enter a lost world, like stepping into the seductive shadows of one of Raphael Soyer's or Isabelle Ryndas' moody paintings of street life during the Great Depression.