



# SEAN O'CASEY AND THE CIVIL WAR

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By 1920, after almost twenty years work in the nationalist and labour movement, O’Casey came to the conclusion that he would be more useful to the movement as a writer rather than as an activist. O’Casey had started writing *The Crimson in the Tricolour* in 1921, at the height of the War of Independence. Unfortunately the text has not survived and is now lost. We know that the play was O’Casey’s statement on the struggle between Labour and Sinn Féin. In the play the nationalist position was represented by a character based on Arthur Griffith, while the union leader was an obvious parody of a sell-out bureaucrat based on William O’Brien of the ITGWU and also a rank and file worker called Kevin O’Regan, a socialist, not unlike O’Casey. The ‘crimson’ that O’Casey wanted to inject into the ‘tricolour’ was that of the Russian Revolution of 1917. O’Casey described it as a ‘play of ideas’, and it contained two characters that were reincarnated later as ‘the Covey’ and Fluther in *The Plough and the Stars*. The Abbey directors were hesitant about the proposed production because of the political position in the country at the time:

It is the expression of ideas that makes it interesting... But we could not put it on while the Revolution is unaccomplished—it might hasten the Labour attack on Sinn Féin, which ought to be kept back till the fight with England is over and the new Government has had time to show what it can do.<sup>1</sup>

O’Casey put behind him the rejection of *The Crimson in the Tricolour*, and in 1923, towards the end of the Civil War, the Abbey produced *The Shadow of a Gunman*. There are weaknesses in this play, issues that are not intellectually worked through. O’Casey does not attempt to portray the heroic side of the struggle, but he does portray how it looked to those whose world never extended a great deal further than a two-room tenement in the slums of Dublin. A contemporary review in 1924, shortly after the end of the Civil War, reflects the excitement the play generated in the way it caught the popular mood of the people:

It tells everybody what they thought while the two armies shot up each other and made life hideous for people who wanted to go about their business and live a normal human life. It gets back at the heroes. It is a play of disillusion for a people who have been disillusioned, and can take their disillusionment without bitterness.<sup>2</sup>

## One-act interlude

In March 1922, during the lead up to the Civil War, O’Casey had published a short story, ‘The Seamless Coat of Kathleen’ in *Poblacht na hÉireann*, a republican anti-treaty paper published by Erskine Childers. The story is an allegorical account of the treaty debate which had taken place in the Mansion House in January. His sympathies for the anti-treaty republican side are evident in this Swiftian-style fantasy. He reworked the story as a one-act play of the same name and sent it to the Abbey for consideration. The script was returned a week later with a comment saying that they had read the play and liked it a great deal, especially the ‘humour and the element of phantasy in it. At the same time it is too definite a piece of propaganda for us to do it’.<sup>3</sup> A year later O’Casey resurrected the script, updating and rewriting it to take account of the political situation in the months following the end of the Civil War. He submitted the revised script to the Abbey as *Cathleen Listens In*, and it premiered in October 1923.

*Cathleen Listens In* was a topical play, in which Cathleen, the daughter of O’Houlihan, is a modern

young woman who lives in a Free State house, which her father had acquired by selling the family cow. She is wooed politically by a Free State politician, a farmer, a republican, and a socialist each vying for her vote. According to O'Casey, the play was received in total silence; whether this was due to a lack of understanding of the political point that O'Casey was making or just bafflement at the ironic comedy on the stage is hard to say. The theme had currency and would have been clear enough to the audience. O'Houlihan is repairing his house from the ravages of the recent turmoil and paints the door green, while his wife spends her time doing the laundry proclaiming: 'I don't think there's a house in the whole wide world that there's so much washin' to be done as there is in this house'.<sup>4</sup> O'Casey was determined that the Free State's dirty linen would be washed in public, even if that meant the play was received in stony silence. What concerned O'Casey was whether the Free State would face up to the past in an honest way, and more importantly, offer some hope for the future. Jimmy, a workman who is repairing the house and a member of the Labour Party, goes on strike, demanding that they paint the house red. He announces to all and sundry: 'Th' hardest worked an' th' worst fed in the house—I'll emigrate to Russia, so I will'.<sup>5</sup>

### Juno's lament

*Juno and the Paycock*, first produced at the Abbey in 1924, is set during the terrible events of the Civil War. Captain Boyle, a strutting self-centred 'paycock' dominates the stage with his presence, but it is Juno, a god-fearing determined woman, who holds the family and the play together.

The execution of their son, Johnny Boyle, by his former comrades in the anti-treaty forces for informing on his neighbour and comrade was based on a real event. The dominant theme in *Juno and the Paycock* is one of betrayal. Johnny Boyle betrays his republican comrade, Tancred, just as Jerry Devine betrays his socialist principles in the way that he rejected the pregnant Mary Boyle. All of these betrayals heighten the connections between the interior life of the tenement and world outside. O'Casey always referred to it as a play about Johnny Boyle set against the background of the Civil War.<sup>6</sup> In painting Johnny's character, O'Casey seems to point to a misguided idealism that led him to betray

the ideals of the revolution, but in making Johnny the central tragic figure of the play, O'Casey makes him less of a man. John Crowley, who produced *Juno and the Paycock* in 1999, suggested in an interview that 'it feels as if Johnny's story is one draft short, and if we examine the first draft of the play, Johnny's story is far less significant'.<sup>7</sup> In writing up Johnny's character, O'Casey never filled in the background—there is no depth to Johnny's character.

Why did Johnny Boyle betray his republican comrade Tancred, who is abducted and shot by the Free State forces? Boyle and Tancred were neighbours and friends who lived in the same tenement. They both fought on the anti-treaty side in the Civil War. There are several explanations commonly put forward for Johnny's betrayal. Firstly, that he is broken psychologically by the experience and suffering from what today would be called post-traumatic stress, and was therefore not responsible for his actions. The second and more insidious explanation is that Johnny has lost faith in his republican ideals and had become an informer for the Free State. O'Casey's pacifist supporters also like to point out that O'Casey was condemning war in all its aspects because of the suffering it unleashed on the helpless people of the tenements. None of these explanations seems adequate. O'Casey set out to rid Ireland of the 'dead weight of heroes' which he maintained had paralysed the people from taking any action that might transform their lives. O'Casey believed that the idealism of Wolfe Tone, Robert Emmet, and the men and women of 1916 had been transformed into an abstraction devoid of any social content. Describing the political limitations of the Irish nationalist movement, Peadar O'Donnell reinforces O'Casey's contention:

The economic framework and social relationships...were declared outside the scope of the Republican struggle; even the explosive landlord-tenant relationship, the rancher-small farmer tension. The Republican movement was inspired by 'pure ideals'. In the grip of this philosophy the Republican struggle could present itself as a democratic movement of mass revolt without any danger to the social pattern; without any danger to the haves from the have-nots...under the

shelter of pure ideals the Irish middle class held its place within a movement it feared.<sup>8</sup>

Years later, O'Casey expressed his dissatisfaction with the play, and we can see why. Johnny's character lacks the depth or complexity that might provide the political or psychological background for his betrayal of his friend and comrade. This weakness in characterisation and the political context of Johnny's actions has left O'Casey open to the accusation that *Juno and the Paycock* was an attack on the republican movement that offered no alternative except to condemn violence for political ends.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Lady Gregory (1978), *Journals*, Daniel J. Murphy (ed.), 2 Vvol. Is., (Gerrards Cross, 1978-1988), , vol. 1, p. 307.

<sup>2</sup> P.S. O'Hegarty, P.S. (1924) *Irish Statesman*, vol. 2(4), no. 4, 7 June 1924.

<sup>3</sup> Sean O'Casey, S. (1975) *Letters*, vol. 1, p. 101.

<sup>4</sup> Sean O'Casey, S. (1963) *Feathers From a Green Crow*, (London, 1963), p. 288.

<sup>5</sup> Sean O'Casey, *Feathers From a Green Crow*, p. 280.

<sup>6</sup> Gabriel Fallon, G. (1965) *Sean O'Casey: The Man I Knew*, (London, 1965), p.19.

<sup>7</sup> Victoria Stewart, V. (2003) *About O'Casey: The Playwright and the Work*, (London, 2003), p. 110.

<sup>8</sup> Peadar O'Donnell, quoted in James Plunkett, J. (1978) *The Gems She Wore*, (London, 1978), p. 161.

