



Review of Stewart Parker: A Life by Marilynne Richtarik

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Stewart Parker: A Life by Marilynn Richtarik. Oxford University Press, 2012. xxvii, 419 pp. £32. 978-0-19-969503-4

Stewart Parker is often spoken of as Ireland's most unjustly neglected dramatist. His first play *Spokesong* was an unexpected hit at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1975; his last play *Pentecost* (1987) is one of the great works about the Troubles in Northern Ireland. And in the years between those two productions, he wrote several other dramas – all on (ostensibly) different themes, but all unified by a spirit of playful experimentation. Parker's death from cancer in 1988 – at the age of only 47 – robbed the Irish theatre of a figure who had already shown greatness, and who obviously had much more to accomplish.

This new biography from Marilynn Richtarik will do a great deal to re-focus attention on Parker's works. While she is sensitive to – and very interesting about – Parker's interest in poetry, journalism, and other forms of writing, Richtarik's greatest strength is her detailed understanding of theatre. She declares frankly in her introduction that Parker's plays are "difficult to do well" (p. xi), yet she repeatedly offers insights that will allow would-be directors to overcome those difficulties. The incisiveness of her analysis makes the book a genuine pleasure to read.

Of particular interest in this context is her reading of Parker's *Northern Star* (1984), an extraordinary play that pastiches Sheridan, Shaw, Wilde, O'Casey, Synge, and many other great Irish writers. "The mimicry serves political as well as aesthetic ends," writes Richtarik, explaining how Parker is at once presenting himself as next in line to the dramatists he is invoking – while also using that "multiplicity of voices" to imagine the possibility of a more pluralistic Ireland (p. 257).

That link between the aesthetic and the political is shown to be crucial for an understanding of Parker's life and work. He was born into a working class Protestant family in east Belfast in 1941, and was educated at Queens University in Belfast, studying there at much the same time as Seamus Heaney, Seamus Deane, and many others who would develop careers as writers. That environment inspired the young Parker: "Queen's is not an oasis, but it is a power-store," he wrote in 1962. "If enough people light matches, we can blast our way out of this cultural siege and then start the war in earnest" (p. 22).

Parker's remarks were metaphorical, of course, yet he may have been showing a subliminal awareness that Northern Ireland was a powder-keg in another, more significant respect: the sectarianism that had dominated life there for decades would soon result in a Civil Rights movement, which later gave way to violent conflict between Catholics and Protestants. The ensuing "Troubles" continued for the rest of Parker's life. As a portrait of a writer grappling with the responsibilities of living in a society at war, Richtarik's book has consequences that go far beyond literature about Northern Ireland.

She also presents a fascinating and at times moving portrait of Parker himself. Richtarik is honest about Parker's flaws and his private failings – but she also captures compellingly his bravery. Parker lost his leg due to cancer at the age of 20, yet that trauma seems, if anything, to have made him more determined to succeed. And that determination persisted for the rest of his life. It was evident in his desire to push Irish drama into new areas, and in his willingness to disrupt our understanding of the differences between popular and literary culture. And it was evident too in his many

attempts to imagine the possibility that Northern Ireland could eventually find peace. Stewart Parker was, fundamentally, an *original* artist – and Richtarik shows convincingly that he deserves to be known better.

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