Across the Water: Northern Irish Drama in London

by Marilynn Richtarik

Northern Irish writers have long faced the challenge of working in the context of an often violent and still unresolved political conflict. For those who accept the responsibility of writing about the Troubles, the problem is how to treat the divisions in the province without sensationalizing them. This problem is particularly acute for Northern dramatists because, as playwright Stewart Parker puts it,

> The raw material of drama is over-abundant here, easy pickings. Domestic bickering, street wit, tension in the shadows, patrolling soldiers, a fight, an explosion, a shot, a tragic death: another Ulster Play written. What statement has it made? That the situation is grim, that Catholics and Protestants hate each other, that it's all shocking and terribly sad, but that the human spirit is remarkably resilient for all that.
>
> Such a play certainly reflects aspects of life here. But it fails to reflect adequately upon them.[1]

Like writers of poetry or fiction, writers of plays often seek to avoid this cliché-mongering by finding metaphorical or symbolic ways of confronting the Northern situation in their work. A hazard of this approach, however, is that the point of what they are doing is sometimes missed by critics and audiences, especially when their plays are performed outside of Northern Ireland. Two plays—*Kingdom Come* by Stewart Parker and *The Saxon Shore* by David Rudkin—will serve to illustrate the dilemma of the Northern dramatist whose work may meet with blank incomprehension in London. This lack of a common context for drama is a symptom of more general cultural confusions, since Northern Irish people are neither simply "Irish" nor merely "British," but somehow both and neither.

Kingdom Come is a "Caribbean-Irish Musical Comedy" with book and lyrics by Parker and music by Shaun Davey. Parker's first produced play had been *Spokesong*, performed at the Dublin Theatre Festival in 1975; at the King's Head, a fringe theatre in London, in 1976; and eventually in the West End in 1977. *Spokesong*'s central character is a Belfast bicycle salesman who is as upset about urban renewal as he is about the explosions all around him and sees in the car bomb a mere logical consequence of technology that has gotten beyond man's understanding. The play fuses the history of Belfast and the history of bicycles in a startlingly original fashion, but its good humour and contemporary setting endeared it to audiences and reviewers alike. As a result of *Spokesong*'s success at the King's Head, Parker was appointed Resident Playwright in 1977, with the brief of writing another play to be performed there.

He set seriously to work on this commission in May by reading up on the Caribbean island of Montserrat, a former British colony settled largely by Irish political exiles and populated in recent times by the descendants of black slaves and early white inhabitants,

with names like Wendell O'Flaherty. Parker was certain that he had stumbled upon "the substance of some sort of entertainment."[2] Meanwhile, there were ructions in Belfast where Parker was then living. Ian Paisley, the militant Protestant leader, had called for a strike by Protestant workers to protest government security policy and demand a return to majority-rule government in Northern Ireland. A similar strike in 1974 had brought the province to a standstill and was directly responsible for the fall of the power-sharing government that for a while had offered hope of cooperation between unionists and nationalists in the governing of Northern Ireland. The first two weeks of May were tense in the city, as people who did not share Paisley's hard-line unionism watched warily to see if the majority of Protestants would once again follow him into battle. The eventual failure of the strike for lack of popular support seemed to Parker to "affirm the worth of ordinary people's basic commonsense."[3]

The play that emerged from this convergence of circumstances was *Kingdom Come*, a farce set on the fictional Caribbean island of Macalla.[4] Macalla is a remote outpost of the British Empire, conquered three hundred years ago by Anglo-Irish privateers under the aegis of the British crown. The native Indians were quickly dispersed, and most of the population of the island is now descended from black slaves and early white settlers, including Irish indentured servants who were little more than slaves themselves. The island was ruled for fifty years in this century by the British Union Party, pledged to the continuation of the link with England, and is now governed directly from Westminster. In fact, the political configuration on the island bears an uncanny resemblance to that in Northern Ireland at the time when Parker was writing the play. Miss Dunwoody, an aristocratic unionist of the Anglo-Irish type, is in league with Wesley Gowan, the police chief who represents the security forces. Father O'Prey, a Catholic priest, adheres to a separatism based on ethnicity and creed, while his ally, newspaperman Huey Lynch, espouses the secular republicanism that emerged in the North in the mid-1960s. Rosita Flanagan is a modern entrepreneur who wrings her hands over the disastrous impact of the island's strife on the tourist business and spies on both the unionist and nationalist factions on behalf of old Pycraft, Macalla's hapless English administrator and a colonial servant of the old school. The final character, Teresa, seems to be without political views at all; she works as a serving girl at the Hotel Macalla, where the action of the play takes place. Rosita, Teresa, Lynch, and Gowan are black; Miss Dunwoody, Father O'Prey, and Pycraft are white; but this is virtually irrelevant to the plot. Setting *Kingdom Come* in the Caribbean is simply a way of shifting the focus on the North and suggesting an unforced comparison with post-colonial animosities elsewhere in the old British Empire.

This unlikely group of people has been assembled by Pycraft to plan a pageant to commemorate the three hundredth anniversary of the island's settlement. The problem is how to commemorate something that half of the population sees as a tragedy and the other half as a triumph. Gowan and Miss Dunwoody want to celebrate the accomplishments of Sir Hugo Flood, the Anglo-Irish buccaneer who first acquired a lease to the island from the British crown. Rosita wants to use the anniversary to refurbish the island's image. Lynch and O'Prey argue that the "heroic event" that should be remembered is the Slave Uprising on St. Patrick's Day, 1767.[5] They all agree to serve on the committee, though, because most of them do not believe that the pageant will ever take place. The unionists, led by Miss Dunwoody and Gowan, are planning a massive strike for that day; Lynch and O'Prey are

plotting an armed takeover of the government and the declaration of an independent republic. Poor Teresa is forced against her will to help further the plots of the various factions, but she also manages to inform each one of the others' activities so that the unionists and nationalists neutralize each other. In the end she is called upon to bear the burden of the entertainment, since the incompetent committee has never gotten around to arranging anything. Departing from the patriotic script Father O'Prey has written for her, Teresa sings a song of her own devising about taking charge of her own destiny. The play ends with this celebration of the common people, more plentiful but less noisy than the fanatics, who care more about survival than about politics.

When *Kingdom Come* opened at the King's Head on 17 January 1978, the London critics were mystified. Part of the problem was undoubtedly the comic complications of the story itself. A more basic difficulty, however, was the critics' lack of familiarity with the prototype for Parker's fictional island—namely, Northern Ireland. Several reviewers failed to grasp Britain's relationship with Macalla, bearing out Huey Lynch's description of the English as "the charming dithering bungling deadly perpetrators of a crime they don't even know they've committed!"[6] *The Guardian*'s Michael Billington regarded Macalla as an island colonized 300 years previously by the Irish and now rather inexplicably "under the thumb of a British Governor-General,"[7] while Irving Wardle of *The Times* declared that "It is . . . as much of a shock to the spectators as it is to the characters when the royal yacht appears purposefully on the horizon; up to that point, one had taken Macalla for an Irish protectorate." "Perhaps," Wardle speculated, "someone has taken the scissors to Mr Parker's book and snipped out Pyecraft's *[sic]* credentials, together with explanations of all the other random alliances in this sunkissed Ulster."[8]

The biggest stumbling-block to an English understanding of the play was the reviewers' inability to accept the fact that religion and political allegiance, not color, were the salient dividing factors in Macalla. Keith Nurse referred in the *Daily Telegraph* to "Protestant patriots" and "Black republicans,"[9] and Michael Coveney wrote in the *Financial Times* that Father O'Prey, Miss Dunwoody, and Pycraft are the exponents of "Anglo-Irish imperialism," while the "voice of the people" sounds through Teresa's "sung black power salute."[10] Billington echoed this interpretation when he complained, "It is never clear why the black Macallans should be involved in the internal sectarian struggles of the whites and how Mr Parker reconciles his apolitical, plague-on-both-your-houses attitude to the Irish problem with his apparent endorsement of black political power." He expressed the view that "in attempting to give us an Irish political allegory in the context of a Caribbean island's quest for identity, Mr Parker has managed to make a confusing situation almost wholly impenetrable."[11]

It took an Irishman to appreciate what Parker was trying to do. Conor Cruise O'Brien, the editor of the *Observer*, took the unusual step of offering a second opinion of *Kingdom Come* after that paper's regular critic had given the show a lukewarm review.[12] O'Brien admitted that when he went to the King's Head to see the play he was skeptical, expecting "a soon-fizzling joke, possibly accompanied by some dim message about the unity of the anti-imperialist struggle throughout the world." He was pleased to report that "I was quite wrong on both counts":

> The joke is brilliantly sustained . . . . And the message is not dim but strong,

> valid and urgent. It is indeed about the liberation of a people. But it is not about their liberation in the sense in which that term is used by those who use it most; quite the contrary. It is about the liberation of the people of Northern Ireland *from their supposed liberators*—the IRA in the case of the Catholics—and from their supposed defenders—the sectarian paramilitaries in the case of the Protestants.

O'Brien particularly liked Teresa's final song, comparing her "escape from her embafflers" to the refusal of the majority of Protestant workers to heed Paisley's strike call in 1977. In his view, the play was a *tour de force*, but one the relation of which to Northern Ireland might not be apparent to people who had never been there. "By transposing Northern Ireland to another climate and to the key of comedy" Parker had "liberated himself and his players, and his audience, from the emotional dominance of the rival fanatics."[13] Parker, deeply depressed after the first reviews, was elated by O'Brien's intervention, writing to Shaun Davey, "Suffice it to say that he understood entirely everything we were trying to do in the show."[14]

Unlike *Kingdom Come*, *The Saxon Shore* was commissioned from David Rudkin in 1982 by an Irish group for performance in Ireland. The Field Day Theatre Company, based in the North, planned to produce the play to tour both Northern Ireland and the Republic. Field Day was a more than purely theatrical enterprise with the goal of discovering and presenting more inclusive images of "Irish" identity, and Rudkin, who had spent much of his childhood and youth in County Armagh, was approached at least in part because he was a Protestant. Rudkin's Northern Irish background had informed his best work. *Cries from Casement as His Bones are Brought to Dublin*, a 1973 radio play, had explored the Irish nationalism of Roger Casement, while the award-winning stage play *Ashes*, a year later, exposed the political dimensions of infertility in a society which feels itself to be under siege. Rudkin had had another idea for a stage play in the back of his mind for some time, and the offer of a commission from Field Day crystallized it. He saw the request as an opportunity to take part in a dialogue about the future of Northern Ireland. Because he believed that most of the plays arising out of the Troubles were too journalistic and allowed audiences to leave the theatre with their prejudices intact, Rudkin made a conscious decision to write a non-naturalistic play about the "plantation mentality" of Northern Protestants.[15]

The device he settled upon was an elaborate historical metaphor. The play is set near the end of the Roman Empire on the "Saxon Shore" of Britain, so-called because it faced the Saxon menace to the east and was inhabited by Saxons resettled by Rome, as was usual imperial practice, to defend against a convergence of threats from Celts north of Hadrian's Wall and Saxons from the North Sea. Rudkin's play centers on two communities, one Saxon and one British, or Celtic. Drama critic Lynda Henderson points out that the parallel between the Saxons and Ulster Protestants is precise, because many of the original seventeenth-century settlers in Ulster were not English themselves, but Huguenot French who had come to Scotland to escape religious intolerance and were later "planted" by the English in Ireland to help subdue the local population.[16] Rudkin reinforces the parallel through language and accents.

The terms of the historic analogy are made clear in other ways, too. Central to the psyche both of Northern Protestants and of Rudkin's Saxons is a sense of crisis, of insecurity, and of being dependent on the whim of an imperial power that does not care

about them. The threat that overhangs the play, finally realized in its conclusion, is that Rome, faced with problems of its own closer to home, will withdraw its army and support from Britain, leaving the Saxons at the mercy of the people they have suppressed. Their vulnerable position makes them preternaturally aware of both the British north of the wall and the Romans across the sea. Like the Northern Irish Protestants, the Saxons do not feel as though they fully belong anywhere. The main Saxon character, Athdark, expresses the curious envy the Saxons have of the dispossessed native British: "They know who they are. Who am I?!"[17]

The fantastic element that features so prominently in many of Rudkin's plays is not absent from this one. In order to present a balanced picture of the "plantation mentality" Rudkin needed to acknowledge its repressive, violent side. Perhaps he was thinking of loyalist paramilitaries, of the ruthlessness of the B-Specials, or of the infamous RUC raid on the Bogside that precipitated some of the worst violence in Derry, when he decided that his Saxons would turn into werewolves at night and prey on the British beyond the wall. The wolf hairs grow inward during the day, and the Saxons are not even aware, in daylight, of what they have been doing at night. The British naturally retaliate with counter-raids, and seem to the beleaguered Saxons inhuman themselves.

Athdark discovers what has been going on when a wound inflicted on him by night appears by day, and from then on the play records his private struggle to control the wolf side of his nature. The gash in his side that he received as a wolf prevents him from holding himself upright, and this illustrates dramatically his stunted personality. Rudkin has described *The Saxon Shore* as "a play about a man learning to stand," and the last image is of Athdark finally straightening himself as, after killing a British princess in his wolf-state, he resolves to give up savagery for good. Rudkin's final stage direction is "He is standing now, the beginnings of a man."[18] The implication for Northern Ireland seems clear: Protestants should look to the land in which they live for their future, together with the people with whom they share it.

Although a Protestant, Rudkin was also an Irish nationalist, and *The Saxon Shore* reflects his views. I believe that this is why, after a few months' deliberation, Field Day decided not to produce the play after all. The company was trying at that time to keep its dramatic work from being associated with any clear political position, and it was felt that the metaphor of Rudkin's play was too overt. Furthermore, the directors of the company worried that it might offend Protestants and unionists in the North.[19]

Rudkin was distraught over Field Day's decision, since he had written *The Saxon Shore* with an Irish production very much in mind. He offered the play to the Lyric Theatre in Belfast, which declined to produce it. Several years later, when Rudkin had given up hope of an Irish presentation for it, *The Saxon Shore* finally opened at the Almeida Theatre in London.[20] Here the reactions of the critics depended very much upon how familiar they were both with Rudkin's background and with Northern Ireland. Michael Ratcliffe in the *Observer* used half of his review to describe the set, calling the play a "thoughtful, intelligent, but somewhat shapeless piece."[21] Michael Coveney of the *Financial Times* called attention to the lighting in "eerie green, flaming orange and searing bright light" (the colors of the Irish flag), but made no explicit reference to Ireland. Instead he complained that "The use of the word 'Saxon' itself is something I feel Rudkin might have clarified. It is like reading those chapters in Bede where the Scots are in fact the Irish, the Picts the Scots."[22] Irving Wardle, the critic for *The Times*, found *The Saxon Shore* a "benighted ordeal" but completely missed the point of the ending, remarking

that "Athdark loses his precarious sense of civilized identity when the Romans leave and reverts to barbarism."[23] Milton Shulman in the *London Standard* and John Barber in the *Daily Telegraph* focused exclusively on what they believed the play had to say about *English* history. Barber wrote,

> Mr Rudkin has turned his poet's mind to the interesting task of disentangling some of the threads woven into the national character. So his hero, the red-haired Saxon Athdark, a Christian, finds himself tugged in all directions as his stout Teuton simplicity encounters the gentle culture of a Celtic girl, the discipline and world-order of Roman civilisation and the blood-lust born into his animal nature.[24]

Whereas the Irish directors of the Field Day company had regarded the metaphor of Roman Britain for Northern Ireland to be so obvious as to be discomfiting, English critics, by and large, had no trouble taking the play at face value. Two of them, however, did see what Rudkin was doing. Michael Billington in the *Guardian* and Richard Allen Cave in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* both appreciated the layers of meaning in *The Saxon Shore*. Cave drew out some of the parallels for English readers: "a withdrawing imperial force, plantation-settlers, a dispossessed people, an era of change and consequent terror, a conflict of racial memories and of the myths that determine identity."[25]

It was the dissonance between the racial memories and myths of the English reviewers and the Northern Irish dramatists that created confusion about *Kingdom Come* and *The Saxon Shore*. The breakdown in communication that resulted from the lack of a common context for performing and evaluating these works interfered with their reception. The playwrights' dilemma is symptomatic of a broader lack of communication between England and Northern Ireland on the political and cultural levels. Another Irish playwright, Frank McGuinness, expresses the weariness of Northern writers with the stock imagery of the Troubles:

> I really do passionately feel that I cannot take seriously any other play about Ireland that features anyone entering with a balaclava. I cannot take seriously any other play that hints that somewhere out the back there's an IRA or . . . a Loyalist bomber about to break in. It's just become a boring cliche. . . .[26]

Many people, both writers and critics, would agree with him. In addition to encouraging a drama that finds fresh ways of addressing the crisis of the province, however, we also need critics who are aware that England is not the whole of the United Kingdom.

NOTES

1. Stewart Parker, *Dramatis Personae* (Belfast: John Malone Memorial Committee, 1986) 18-19.
2. Stewart Parker, journal, 4 May 1977. For an excellent overview of the history of Montserrat and its Irish connections, see Brian McGinn's three-part series "How Irish is Montserrat?" in *Irish Roots* nos.1, 2, and 4 (1994).
3. Stewart Parker, draft treatment of a proposed six-part television series called *Kingdom Come*.

4. "Macalla" is the Irish word for "echo." (I am grateful to Jim Doan for pointing this out to me.)
5. This detail was inspired by the history of Montserrat. McGinn notes that "In addition to honoring St Patrick on 17 March, Montserratians also honour slaves executed after an abortive revolt on 17 March 1768. . . . In this case, the targets of the slave plot were Irish planters who, had everything gone right, might have been too inebriated to resist." (McGinn, "How Irish is Montserrat?" *Irish Roots* no. 1 (1994): 22.) For an account of contemporary celebrations of St. Patrick's Day in Montserrat, see John C. Messenger, "St. Patrick's Day in 'The Other Emerald Isle,'" *Éire-Ireland* 29.1 (Spring 1994): 12-23.
6. Stewart Parker, *Kingdom Come* (typescript), 58.
7. Michael Billington, "Kingdom Come," *Guardian* 18 Jan. 1978: 10.
8. Irving Wardle, "Witty and Agile Lyrics among Exotic Foliage," *The Times* 18 Jan. 1978: 13.
9. Keith Nurse, "King's Head: Kingdom Come," *Daily Telegraph* 19 Jan. 1978.
10. Michael Coveney, "Kingdom Come," *Financial Times* 18 Jan. 1978: 15.
11. Michael Billington, *Guardian* 18 Jan. 1978.
12. Robert Cushman, "Basho and the Tidal Wave" (review of several plays, including *Kingdom Come), Observer* 22 Jan. 1978: 25.
13. Conor Cruise O'Brien, "A Song of Disembafflement," *Observer* 29 Jan. 1978: 28.
14. Stewart Parker, letter to Shaun Davey, 4 Feb. 1978.
15. David Rudkin, personal interview, 26 Oct. 1991.
16. Lynda Henderson, personal interview, 25 Sept. 1989.
17. David Rudkin, *The Saxon Shore* (London: Methuen, 1986) 40.
18. David Rudkin, personal interview, 26 Oct. 1991; *Saxon Shore* 49.
19. For a more detailed account of Rudkin's association with Field Day and the directors' decision not to produce *The Saxon Shore*, see my *Acting Between the Lines: The Field Day Theatre Company and Irish Cultural Politics 1980-1984* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 191-203.
20. David Rudkin, personal interview, 26 Oct. 1991.
21. Michael Ratcliffe, "Paradise Unhitched," *Observer* 9 Mar. 1986: 25.
22. Michael Coveney, "The Saxon Shore," *Financial Times* 4 Mar. 1986: 21.
23. Irving Wardle, "Confusion in the Werewolf Idiom," *The Times* 5 Mar. 1986: 9.
24. Milton Shulman, "Keep your eyes on the woad . . . ," *London Standard* 4 Mar. 1986: 28; John Barber, "Poet's dark ages," *Daily Telegraph* 5 Mar. 1986: 11.
25. Michael Billington, "Howl on the Wilder Shores," *Guardian* 5 Mar. 1986: 11; Richard Allen Cave, "The Past is Not Another Country," *Times Higher Education Supplement* 14 Mar. 1986: 15.
26. Frank McGuinness, interview by Paul Allen for "Kaleidoscope," 1 May 1987.