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Stewart Parker, Belfast Playwright

MARILYNN RICHTARIK

DURING an interview in 1987, the year before he died, Stewart Parker (1941–1988) declared that he was happy to be described as a “Belfast playwright,” adding, “it’s the only kind of description that makes any sense to me.”¹ On one level, this seems a surprising admission for a writer who, roughly twenty years earlier, had recorded in his journal his desire to become a “stateless person” and who had spent a significant portion of his adulthood living and working outside of his native city. Nevertheless, even though Parker’s achievements in various genres certainly transcend any parochial classification, he was born in Belfast and resided there for more than two-thirds of his life. This background, as he was well aware, conditioned everything he wrote. As he told another reporter in 1984, “I shall never stop writing about it and no matter where I live, I will never stop thinking of myself as anybody other than a Belfast person.”²

In fact, there may not be any great contradiction between the pronouncements of Parker’s youth and those of his maturity. In some essential way, in his experience, to be a “Belfast person” was also to be a “stateless person.” As he explained,

Growing up in Belfast as a working class Protestant, I had access to all sorts but did not feel a part of any of them. You’re led to believe you’re British, yet the English don’t recognise you as such. On the other hand, you’re Irish because you’re born in Ireland, but the people in the Free State don’t recognise you as such. The working class element adds another dimension, because you are alienated from the Unionist establishment. You feel conversant with all of those things, but not obliged to any of them. In a sense you inhabit no-man’s land. [...] As an individual it can be very destructive. You have no identity, no ideology, you don’t know where you belong, but as a writer, that’s not a bad way to be. You’ve got a hell of a lot to explore.³

¹ Deirdre Purcell, “The Illusionist,” *Sunday Tribune* (Dublin), September 27, 1987.

² David Simpson, “The Prolific Pen of Mr. Parker,” *Belfast Telegraph*, November 3, 1984.

³ Purcell, “The Illusionist.”

Virtually all of Parker's plays reflect in some fashion upon what it means to hail from Belfast, Northern Ireland, and in a number of his most enduring dramas the city becomes a character in its own right, with its history and its quest for a viable identity placed squarely at the center of the stage.



In a 1976 article on his hometown, Parker begins, "Personally, I love Belfast and hate it with an equal passion."⁴ As a student at Queen's University in the late 1950s and early 1960s, where his undergraduate career overlapped with those of writers such as Seamus Heaney and Seamus Deane, he could not wait to leave the place. As he recollected at the age of forty-five,

At the time it seemed like the back end of nowhere and we all felt really out of it. We all felt that if anything was happening at all it was happening in Dublin, or if it wasn't happening in Dublin it was happening in London, or if it wasn't happening in London it was happening in New York. It sure as hell wasn't happening in Belfast. We were terribly wet behind the ears—and kind of craven in our deference to everything happening elsewhere.⁵

The call of the United States was particularly strong for Parker and his contemporaries, who had been steeped since birth in American popular culture through imported music and movies. The trans-Atlantic tastes of Parker's set were further developed at Queen's, where appreciation of the Beat poets and innovative jazz were emblems of sophistication.

It was hardly remarkable, then, that Parker seized an opportunity to relocate to New York State in 1964. He remained in the United States for five years, teaching in the English departments at Hamilton College and Cornell University. There he found much of what he had dreamed about in bleak, rainy Belfast. As he reminisced later, "Cook-outs on the patio, skin-flicks in the drive-in. I saw the La Mama Company and the Newport Jazz Festival and student revolt and Little Richard and the Hollywood Bowl and Bobby Kennedy. An immense noisy rich cosmopolitan culture, bursting at the seams with vitality

⁴Stewart Parker, "Belfast's Women: A Superior Brand of Dynamite," *Evening Standard*, November 2, 1976.

⁵Purcell, "The Illusionist."

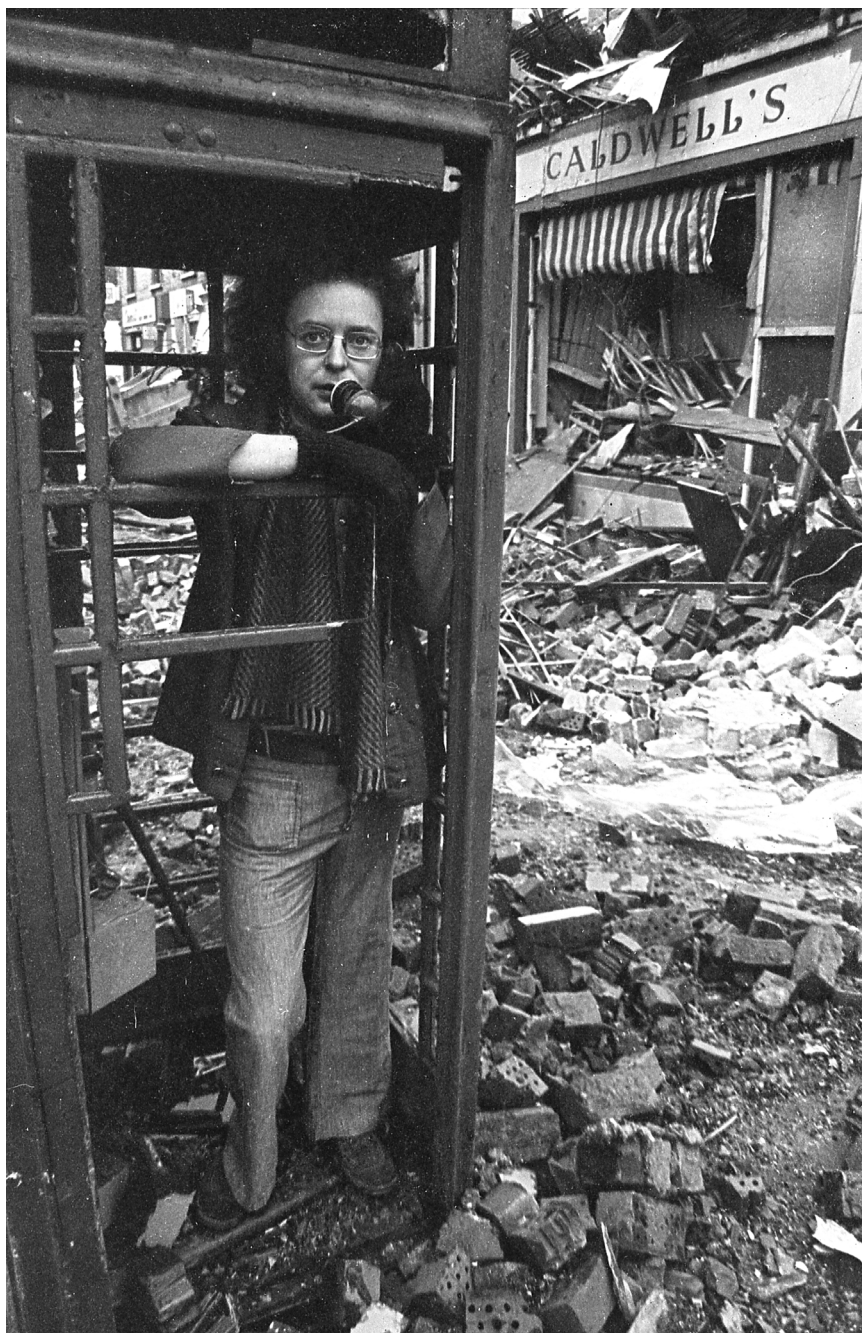
and madness. Instant gratification.” To his own surprise, however, in the middle of all this excitement he found himself “ruminating about Belfast.” After all, “there was the other side to the old hometown, the rootedness, the sense of community, the way every conversation gets handled like a one-act play. And the pubs.”⁶ If he were serious about becoming a writer, he decided, he would have to do two things: stop teaching and go home. He recalled in 1977, “I had to return and come to terms with the place. I had been conducting a private war with it ever since I was born, yet in another way I had a strong atavistic kind of attachment to it and that had to be resolved.”⁷

Parker arrived back in Belfast in August 1969, the same week that British troops were sent into the city to restore order after days of sectarian rioting. He would stay there for the next nine years. These years corresponded with the most randomly violent phase of the recent Troubles, and it would be difficult to imagine a less auspicious time in which to try to launch a career as a playwright. In the early 1970s the paramilitaries favored crowded pubs and city center streets as targets; bombs were set less to kill specific individuals for particular reasons than simply to cause maximum mayhem. People responded by staying close to home, and nightlife in the city dwindled to almost nothing. Most cinemas and theaters in Belfast closed. The Lyric Players Theatre was the only one to remain open throughout this period, but Parker and its management did not see eye to eye. For years, as a consequence, he lived on irregular commissions from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC), a pop music column he wrote for the *Irish Times*, and occasional summer school teaching at Cornell.

In 1975, when Parker completed *Spokesong*, the play that would establish his international reputation, he was, in his words, “desperate for it to be seen first by a Belfast audience.” With a group of friends, collaborators, and supporters, he launched a fund-raising campaign to mount the play in his hometown. The effort aimed at local businesses and the Arts Council of Northern Ireland ended up, Parker remembered ten years later, “with just one positive response—an offer of £75 from British Rail. As an ironist, I felt very keenly the poetic aptness of this donor, whose services I would later engage to take a

⁶Parker, “Belfast’s Women.”

⁷Caroline Walsh, “The Saturday Profile: Stewart Parker,” *Irish Times*, August 13, 1977.



Stewart Parker, photographed by his friend John Gilbert amid the wreckage of Bloody Friday. Historian Jonathan Bardon recounts that on this day, July 21, 1972, the Provisional I.R.A. detonated 20 bombs in Belfast in the space of 65 minutes, killing 9 people and injuring at least 130. Courtesy of John Gilbert.

one-way journey out.”⁸ In 1978 Parker finally gave up on Belfast as a reasonable home base for a playwright and moved to Edinburgh. He lived there for several years before making the pilgrimage to London, where he died of cancer in 1988 at the age of forty-seven.



This brief biographical note is intended to emphasize that Parker was a writer whose sphere of experience and professional activity was hardly limited to Northern Ireland. Throughout his career, his most reliable source of income was the BBC, for which he wrote features, radio drama, and television plays. An accomplished screenwriter, Parker also had television work produced by Thames Television and London Weekend Television. The theaters with which he had the closest working relationships were scattered throughout the British Isles and included the Abbey in Dublin, the King’s Head in Islington, the Birmingham Repertory, Glasgow’s Tron Theatre, and the Field Day Theatre Company, which toured throughout Ireland. As a writer for the *Belfast Telegraph* observed shortly after Parker’s television film *Blue Money* attracted a British audience of eleven million, “Stewart Parker is from Belfast and his latest play ‘Blue Money,’ was watched by around one in five of the population four weeks ago. Yet when one thinks of contemporary dramatists from Northern Ireland, it is names like Graham Reid and Martin Lynch which come to mind—not Stewart Parker. [...] Parker, it seems, has been so successful that he has risen above the category of ‘Ulster playwright.’”⁹

In fact, paradoxically, this self-proclaimed “Belfast playwright” was rarely produced in Belfast in his lifetime.¹⁰ As one critic attempted to explain in 1987, “he’s a little bit too intellectual, too clever for Belfast and some of his plays fail because of that.” Other critics, he added, had tried to categorize Parker’s work by pointing to the English writers Tom Stoppard and Dennis Potter.¹¹ The occasional touring pro-

⁸ Stewart Parker, “Signposts,” *Theatre Ireland* 11 (Autumn 1985), 28.

⁹ Simpson, “Prolific Pen of Mr. Parker.”

¹⁰ In more recent years, Belfast’s Tinderbox Theatre Company has been instrumental in reviving interest in Parker’s work in his hometown, performing *Catchpenny Twist* in 1990 and *Pentecost* in 1994. For the 1998 Belfast Festival, in cooperation with Field Day, the company produced *Northern Star*, directed by Parker’s friend Stephen Rea.

¹¹ Robert Allen, “Stewart Parker: Playwright from a Lost Tribe,” *Irish Times*, January 31, 1987.



duction of a Parker play might find its way to Belfast, but it was not until 1982, when the new management of the Lyric Theatre decided to mount Parker's "Irish-Caribbean musical" *Kingdom Come* (1978), that any of his stage plays received a major indigenous production. Remarkably, *Northern Star*, commissioned by the Lyric for its 1984 season, was the *only* one of Parker's plays to have its premiere in Belfast. There had been productions of *Spokesong* in Dublin, London, and on Broadway—as well as in Belgium, Denmark, Finland, Canada, Sweden, The Netherlands, Norway, Australia, New Zealand, and all over the United States—before it was finally produced by the Lyric Theatre of Belfast in 1989, the year after Parker's death. He had predicted something of the sort.¹²

Clearly, then, it was something other than a mere accident of geography that made Stewart Parker think of himself as a Belfast playwright. He was a writer who believed in the artist's responsibility to engage with the public issues of his day, but he acknowledged at the same time the competing individualistic desire to express himself without constraint. Thus the ongoing Troubles in Northern Ireland made it practically impossible for him to write about anything else, although for the most part he resisted the compulsion to make the violence itself the subject of his drama. This inner conflict was one that Parker shared with most Northern Irish writers of his generation, who often explored it in their literary works (Heaney's poem "Exposure" being perhaps the most famous example). Parker himself treated the Northern artist's dilemma most explicitly in three plays originally written for three different media.

I'm a Dreamer, Montreal, produced by BBC Radio (Belfast) in 1977 and revised by Parker for Thames Television in 1979, focuses on a young show band singer named Nelson Glover, whose political naiveté is symbolized by his inability to keep the words of songs straight and his unwillingness to try to do so. Living for his art and believing implicitly in the artist's ability to reshape reality, he hardly notices that the Troubles exist. His obliviousness lands him in prison for a night after an ill-advised gig at a republican hall turns into a riot. His innocence somehow survives this ordeal and the bombing of the music library where he works, but he finally sheds it when faced with painful revelations about the girl he thinks he loves. It is a sadder but a

¹² Parker, "Signposts," 29.

wiser Nelson who informs a bus conductor at the end of the play that the words to the song the man is singing are “I’m a dreamer, aren’t we all” and not “I’m a dreamer, Montreal.”

Parker took up some of the same themes in a darker vein in *Catchpenny Twist*, a “charade” with music by Shaun Davey that was first produced by the Abbey’s Peacock Theatre in August 1977 and aired in a television version by the BBC in December of that year. Roy Fletcher and Martyn Semple, the songwriting duo at the center of the action, want to use their talents to escape from the archaic sectarian strife of Belfast into the light of the twentieth century. But Parker saw the “brave new world” of consumer culture, represented in the play by the arena of commercial pop music, as “murderous also, in its own inviting way.”¹³ Unlike Nelson Glover, who merely had his head in the sand, Roy and Martyn cynically and frivolously attempt to cash in on the violence, writing songs to order for both republican and loyalist groups. Before long they receive bullets through the mail and beat a hasty retreat to Dublin and then London, where they continue to pursue their dream of success. The past, however, abruptly catches up with them in an airport lounge outside Ettelbruck, Luxembourg, where they have just lost a European song contest to an inane number called “The Zig-Zag Song.” They open a congratulatory package that turns out to be a letter bomb, and in the last moments of the play the audience sees them “groping about blindly,” their “hands and faces covered in blood.”¹⁴ “It’s black,” admitted Parker; “it even shocks me slightly.”¹⁵

Finally, in *Radio Pictures*, Parker’s 1985 BBC television play about the taping of a radio play, a Northern Irish actress in the cast indicts the playwright, also from Northern Ireland, for writing escapist allegory instead of putting himself at the service of his people: “You’re using your precious imagination as a substitute for reality.” The playwright defends himself valiantly in terms that Parker himself must have been tempted to employ often enough, protesting that “nurturing the imagination is a service, the only true service an artist can perform. Reality is meaningless until the imagination perceives it.”

¹³ Stewart Parker, “Author’s Notes” to *Catchpenny Twist* (New York: Samuel French, 1984), 93.

¹⁴ Parker, *Catchpenny Twist*, 91.

¹⁵ Quoted in Raymond Gardner, “Too Many People Have Writing in the Head . . .,” *Guardian*, December 6, 1976.

“Is that so?” the actress replies. “Well, my sister’s husband got shot in the head by the army. The bullet went clean through his imagination, without waiting for him to perceive it.”¹⁶

As one might infer from his portrayals of artist-figures torn by the same contradictory impulses as he was himself, Parker sympathized with their wish for freedom of imagination but felt even more keenly the duty thrust upon him by a particular time and place to bring insight rather than obfuscation to public perceptions of what often seemed a hopeless situation. This responsibility was a solemn one because, as he wrote, “a play which reinforces complacent assumptions, which confirms lazy preconceptions, which fails to combine emotional honesty with coherent analysis, which goes in short for the easy answer, is in my view actually harmful.”¹⁷ Parker was always looking for unexpected angles of attack on what remained essentially the same questions: Why were the inhabitants of a tiny province with a population of fewer than 1.5 million killing one another? What did they believe could possibly be achieved by it? And what might induce them to stop? Taking as his exemplar Sam Thompson, a member of the previous generation of Belfast playwrights with whose working-class Protestant roots and socialist politics he could identify, Parker conceived of the dramatist as “a truth-teller, a sceptic in a credulous world.”¹⁸

The challenge for Parker and his contemporaries was how to treat the divisions in the province without sensationalizing or exploiting them. One approach was to look for metaphorical or symbolic ways of confronting the problems of the North. Parker employs this technique in *Kingdom Come*, a farce set on the fictional Caribbean island of Macalla (modeled on an actual former British colony, Montserrat). Apart from the fact that half of the population is white and half is black, the political configuration in this remote outpost of the British Empire bears an uncanny resemblance to that of Northern Ireland, with an Anglo-Irish Unionist, a police chief, a Catholic priest, a secular republican journalist, an aspiring capitalist, and a hapless

¹⁶ Stewart Parker, “Radio Pictures,” BBC rehearsal script, 1985, pp. 96–97 (collection of the author). The Linen Hall Library in Belfast maintains an archive that includes unpublished Parker plays, this one among them.

¹⁷ Stewart Parker, *Dramatis Personae* (Belfast: John Malone Memorial Committee, 1986), 19.

¹⁸ Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 18.

English administrator all struggling to impose their wills on a young girl named Teresa, whose rejection of all their competing claims on her at the end of the play celebrates the fundamental common sense of the ordinary person. Setting the play in the Caribbean allowed Parker to suggest an unforced comparison between Northern Ireland's Troubles and other postcolonial animosities, though the issues at stake are transposed "to the key of comedy."¹⁹

The Kamikaze Ground Staff Reunion Dinner, a radio play produced by the BBC (Edinburgh) in 1979, also has the quality of an elaborate joke in its displacement of attitudes that sustain the Northern crisis.²⁰ The play was inspired in part, Parker claimed, by his attendance at a Boy Scout reunion dinner, which gave him an opportunity to reflect upon the ways in which grown men revert to being boys in such circumstances, reveling unabashedly in the "masculine virtues."²¹ The play is literally about a group of middle-aged Japanese men who serviced the planes of the kamikaze pilots during World War II. They have lived to tell the tale of the suicide missions they did not fly themselves and meet annually to relive those days and commemorate the heroic exploits of the pilots. Their nostalgia for the "good old days" of war-time allows Parker to raise serious questions about fanatical nationalism, hero worship, and the cult of blood sacrifice. In the BBC production, the characters' names and many of the cultural references are Japanese, but the idiom and accents are English. Parker had actually done extensive research on wartime Japan and the kamikaze pilots, but a fruitful tension is created by the medium of radio between the Japanese and the British/Irish contexts of the action.

In his six-part series of television films, *Lost Belongings* (1987), Parker deploys a different literary strategy, basing the plot on the ancient Ulster narrative "The Exile of the Sons of Uisliu" (otherwise known as the story of Deirdre of the Sorrows). Epic in scope, this series is his most ambitious and most direct portrayal of the Troubles themselves.

¹⁹ Conor Cruise O'Brien, "A Song of Disembafflement," *Observer*, January 29, 1978.

²⁰ This radio play was awarded a Giles Cooper Award by the BBC and Eyre Methuen and published in *Best Radio Plays of 1980* (London: Methuen, 1981). Parker later reworked the basic idea for television, but the conception was far better suited to radio.

²¹ Stewart Parker, interview by James Mackey, *Perspectives*, BBC Television (Northern Ireland), recorded May 30, 1987.

Within the overarching framework of the Deirdre myth, the range of characters, incidents, settings, and attitudes toward Northern Ireland that Parker manages to include is nothing short of remarkable. Each film was intended to stand independently but to gain from its association with the other five; most of the secondary characters do not correspond to figures in the legend, but all flesh out the panorama of life in contemporary Belfast. Orangemen, terrorists (from both sides), and ordinary working-class folk jostle for position with artists, academics, and journalists. Locations range from a mission meeting to the Queen's Festival, from the Maze Prison to the Ulster Museum, from the narrow streets of Belfast to the Fermanagh countryside. In attempting to bring dramatic form and coherence to his experience of life in Belfast through the 1970s, Parker aimed to give viewers both inside and outside the province insight into the underlying causes of the political impasse in a manner that would be entertaining and engaging on a human level but at the same time faithful to his own experience of the place, the people, and the time.

What these three very different works have in common is their urge toward political analysis. Whether the vision was comic, as in *Kingdom Come*, tragic, as in *Lost Belongings*, or somewhere in between, as in *The Kamikaze Ground Staff Reunion Dinner*, Parker explicitly hoped to educate his audience into a deeper understanding of what was happening in Belfast. In several of his other plays, Parker was less inclined to try to explain Belfast than to use it as a backdrop. *Iris in the Traffic*, *Ruby in the Rain*, televised by the BBC in 1981, is "a condensed female variant on the Dedalus-Bloom odyssey" in *Ulysses*,²² but set in Belfast. Like Joyce's Dublin, Belfast is vividly evoked. Parker portrays a city beset by poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, mental illness, child abuse, spousal desertion, and sexual harassment—all heightened by the pressure of the Troubles, which divert attention and resources away from these perennial social ills. Parker was determined that the play should be an unsentimental slice of Northern Irish life, one that would reflect the day-to-day realities of people's lives in the shadow of the Troubles rather than a "mainland" British audience's stereotyped preconceptions about the place. For this reason, he stood his ground when faced with the incomprehension of more than one potential director. To his annoyance, "they said this could equally well be

²² Stewart Parker, "Me & Jim," *Irish University Review* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1982), 32.

happening in Glasgow, Liverpool or Birmingham, implying that Belfast is a place apart, somewhere on another planet. In other words, if you write a play about the place it has to be about extraordinary things that happen there and only there.” His own intention was to say, “Look, here are two people living in that city and they have exactly the same preoccupations as you or I do. [...] They come from different backgrounds and deal with unsatisfactory situations as best they can and ... yes, they do it in the context of Belfast with all the extra pressure that living there these days involves.”²³

Joyce in June (1982), another BBC television play reflecting Parker’s fascination with James Joyce, is divided into two parts. In the first, “Artist as a Young Man,” Parker depicts some incidents from Joyce’s life in June 1904, the period that Joyce later immortalized in *Ulysses*; the second, “Juanita, or the Rose of Castille,” is Parker’s imagined “postscript” to *Ulysses*, a dramatization of Molly Bloom’s planned concert tour to Belfast in the company of Blazes Boylan, which is mentioned several times in Joyce’s novel. Indeed, it would not be unreasonable to deduce the rule of thumb that no matter where a Parker play begins, it will sooner or later end up in Belfast. As Parker himself conceded, “I feel an almost Oedipal obsession with Belfast. The city has stuck to me like a burr on my sleeve that no amount of flapping will dislodge.”²⁴



Stewart Parker, then, was a writer who was almost always thinking about Northern Ireland, no matter what else he might be writing about. He was also a writer obsessed with Belfast in much the same way that Joyce remained rooted in Dublin even as he spent his entire adult life in self-imposed exile. In the final analysis, though, it is Parker’s intense engagement throughout his career with the *history* of his native city that most justifies his claim to the title of “Belfast playwright.” In an author’s note to the Samuel French edition of *Catchpenny Twist* (1984), aimed at a largely North American audience, Parker tried to convey the relevance of history to the headlines of the present:

²³ Quoted in Jeananne Crowley, “Belfast Revisited,” *Radio Times*, November 21–27, 1981.

²⁴ Stewart Parker, “Buntus Belfast,” *Irish Times*, January 28, 1970.

When Americans talk about “the past”, they might mean Watergate, or Chappaquiddick, or maybe Dallas in 1963. When the Irish say “the past”, they’re gesturing back at least three hundred years to Cromwell and King Billy, and often beyond. [...]

Grow up in Northern Ireland today, and your every step is dogged by whichever of the two camps you were born into. You can surrender to it, react against it, run away from it . . . you can’t ignore it. The past is alive and well and killing people in Belfast.²⁵

Although he had recognized from the start of the Troubles the importance of history to the Northern Irish stalemate, his problem at first was to find a way to deal with it dramatically. Parker’s work for BBC Northern Ireland’s Schools Department in the early 1970s provided him with a crucial apprenticeship.

The BBC’s charter included an educational mission, and a central Schools Department in London produced radio programs on history, literature, science, and even physical education that were broadcast weekly in a format aimed at the classrooms of the United Kingdom. Each region of the BBC also had a certain number of slots that it could fill with its own programming. Not until 1960, however—roughly forty years after regions like Scotland and Wales—did Northern Ireland acquire its own Schools Department to produce programs of mainly local interest.²⁶ The reason for the delay was political: Unionist officials resisted the creation of a broadcasting entity whose *raison d’être* would be to focus on “Irish” subjects, associated in their minds with republican views; Nationalists, on the other hand, regarded with suspicion the offerings of a broadcasting corporation with the prefix “British” attached to its name.

The formation of the Northern Ireland Schools Department reflected the easing of communal tensions in the province that would continue through the first half of the 1960s. But the Troubles had started by the time Parker was writing for it in the 1970s, and the department had become, in effect, an “emergency service” providing a more “consistent and coherent” treatment of things Irish than any other BBC department in the region.²⁷ A small team of

²⁵ Parker, “Author’s Notes” to *Catchpenny Twist*, 92–93.

²⁶ Rex Cathcart, *The Most Contrary Region: The BBC in Northern Ireland 1924–1984* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1984), 200.

²⁷ Douglas Carson, interview by the author, Belfast, Northern Ireland, November 21, 1998. Carson and Tony McAuley (see note 28) were producers in the Northern

educators-turned-producers ran the Northern Ireland Schools Department from their offices in Belfast, producing several series of programs annually on Irish history, Irish geography, Irish writing, and Northern Irish history and culture. Parker himself worked most often for a program called *Today and Yesterday in Northern Ireland*, a miscellany of history, legend, folklore, social geography, storytelling, music, and contemporary culture.²⁸ The local Schools broadcasts were enjoyed by the general population as well as by the captive audiences in classrooms, and those who tuned in were given an opportunity, in the anonymous space provided by radio, to enrich their understanding of Northern Ireland and its complex relationship with the rest of Ireland, Britain, Europe, and the world. At a time when many other outlets for creative expression were cut off, BBC Schools Northern Ireland also provided steady employment for local writers and actors, who had a chance through frequent Schools production sessions to get to know one another.

The social commitment of the Northern Ireland Schools Department—its aim of persuading the future decision makers of the province to acknowledge, respect, and even appreciate Northern Ireland's diversity and to recognize the intertwining strands of a shared Northern Irish culture—underlay everything it produced. A young writer could also imbibe a great deal about professionalism through working for the BBC. Accuracy was always of paramount importance, and producers and writers collaborated on the research that went into any Schools program. Writers had to work to a deadline; they usually had about a month to write any given script, which would then be subject to (sometimes extensive) revision before being sent on to the studio for recording and editing. Moreover, most Schools programs employed a semi-dramatized format, with a narrator and actors, and were treated by the producers and technical support people as serious radio drama. Thus they provided particularly useful experience for aspiring playwrights.

The use of Ulster dialect was a distinctive feature of BBC Schools Northern Ireland productions, and writers for the radio programs faced the difficulties and partook of the liberties that writing for radio

Ireland Schools Department. Parker worked for both of them, as well as for the head of the department, David Hammond.

²⁸ Tony McAuley, interview by the author, Belfast, Northern Ireland, November 14, 1998.

in general affords. Large casts, for example, were not a problem, but one's message had to be conveyed by appealing to the ear alone. Writing for Schools also honed skills of selection, exposition, clarity, and concision. In some respects, the challenges faced by a writer for *Today and Yesterday in Northern Ireland* were unique: to present material of substance about, for example, the first Catholic parish priest of Belfast (one of Parker's subjects), material that would certainly be regarded as controversial in certain quarters; to do this with political aims that must never appear to be partisan or too overt; to ensure the accuracy of said material; to balance factual narration and more engaging dramatization; to capture and hold the attention of children ranging from ten to thirteen years of age, from all sorts of backgrounds—and to do all this in twenty minutes.

Parker's on-the-job training as a Schools writer left its mark on his interests, strategies, and craftsmanship as a playwright. His radio play *The Iceberg*, produced by BBC Northern Ireland in 1974 and first transmitted in January 1975, was, Parker said later, the first of his scripts that he felt he wanted to keep.²⁹ In the play he tells a story about the *Titanic* that does not focus on its sinking on April 15, 1912. Everyone knows what happened, and Parker plays on the audience's knowledge throughout in a textbook application of dramatic irony. The action instead centers on Hugh and Danny, workers from the Belfast shipyard that built what was then "the largest vessel in the world."³⁰ The audience does not even have the usual suspense of wondering whether the two protagonists will live or die, because they are already dead—ghosts haunting the ship on its maiden voyage.

Parker got the idea for the play while reading the Irish socialist James Connolly, who made the point that while the world was shocked and horrified by the deaths of millionaires on board the *Titanic*, no one seemed to give a thought to the seventeen Belfast shipyard workers who were killed during its construction.³¹ As Hugh complains, "at least they could have put us in the Table of Statistics—S. S. Titanic. Length Overall: 882' 9". Gross tonnage: 46,328. Passenger Capacity: 2,440. Crew: 860. Workers Killed During Construction: seventeen or thereabouts" (62).³² People can see and hear

²⁹ Allen, "Stewart Parker."

³⁰ Jonathan Bardon, *Belfast: An Illustrated History* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1982), 176.

³¹ Gardner, "Too Many People Have Writing in the Head."

³² Stewart Parker, "The Iceberg," *Honest Ulsterman* 50 (Winter 1975), 4–64. Further references to this version of the play will be cited by page number in the text.

Hugh and Danny, and the two men are subject to emotions and sensations, but their fate has already been sealed. They are beyond harm, or, as they put it, “home and dry” (64). The destiny of the other passengers, though, has yet to be decided. In the closing moments of the play, as the ship approaches and hits the iceberg, Hugh and Danny’s description of the scene (windless, dark, the sea calm and “black as gas”) echoes the language they used earlier to describe the instant before their own accident (17, 63). Parker suggests in this way that what is about to happen to the ship as a whole is no worse than what happened to them individually. In writing *The Iceberg*, he rescues their deaths from inconsequence.

Parker was also struck by the coincidence in time between the shipwreck and the debate in the British House of Commons on the Third Irish Home Rule Bill, “a moment long awaited by the Nationalists of the Irish Party and long feared by the Unionists.”³³ Organized Unionist resistance to the idea of Home Rule for the whole of Ireland would result directly in partition and indirectly in the political impasse and renewed violence experienced by Parker and his contemporaries. In *The Iceberg* Parker makes the doomed ship a metaphor for the equally ill-fated statelet of Northern Ireland. The *Titanic*’s grand staircase and first-class dining salon are designed and decorated “in the style of the time of William and Mary,” the very time when the original Protestant planters were solidifying their control of Ulster, and it represents the province’s “proudest offering—to the Empire—and to the world” (7, 33). What had been intended as a monument to Belfast ingenuity, however, would be remembered as a tragic vessel whose short career was marred by the hubris that allowed it to set sail with 2,201 people and only twenty lifeboats on board.³⁴ Throughout the play, Parker implies an ironic contrast between the ship’s luxurious appointments (private promenade decks, stained glass windows, gymnasium, Turkish baths, and so forth) and its ignominious end.

Characters at two social levels debate the extent to which Belfast (and, by extension, Northern Ireland) has been made or hampered by its association with the British Empire. In the first-class lounge, Thomas Andrews, managing director of the Harland & Wolff shipyard and chief designer of the *Titanic*, encounters Dr. O’Loughlin, a Southern Irishman and Home Ruler. Andrews is characterized by

³³ Bardon, *Belfast*, 177.

³⁴ Bardon, *Belfast*, 177.

Parker as the stereotypical honest Ulsterman. He is unemotional and relentlessly hard-working, a perfectionist and a philistine. Naturally, he is also a Unionist, opposing Home Rule because it will mean “Dublin taxes on Northern industry to prop up its own peasant economy.” “We’re simply rationalists up in the North, doctor,” he explains. “We look at Belfast today, a city close to half a million souls employed in manufacturing industries that can compete with any in the world. Yet what was it before the Act of Union made us part and parcel of Britain? A scruffy provincial village” (60).

His views are parroted by Danny, who is convinced that a ship like the *Titanic* could never have been built by the “shiftless” people of Cork. Hugh, older and more experienced, is of the opinion that “[i]f they had the chance to get the jobs in the South, they’d work as blindly as us poor gets.” Soon the two are embroiled in an argument about whether Belfast is servant or master, with Danny taking pride in the fact that “Belfast-built” is a phrase that means “Workmanship” the world over. Hugh retorts that the ship was paid for by English magnates and built for “Yankee” millionaires: “I didn’t notice them inviting the mayor of Belfast on the maiden voyage. Take a walk round the decks and ask all the tycoons you meet where the ship was built [...]. I guarantee you that nine out of ten of them won’t have a notion” (45). This scene is followed immediately by one in the first-class lounge, where someone is singing a patriotic song about “Merry England” (46).

Later, Hugh and Danny read in the ship’s newspaper about protests against the Home Rule Bill in Belfast and German plans to build an ocean liner even bigger than the *Titanic*. Through this juxtaposition Parker makes the point that Belfast’s fate is being decided in a context of imperial competition that has little to do with its best interests (four years later, 5,500 men of the Ulster Division would be killed or wounded on the first day of the Battle of the Somme). Danny is crestfallen, but sure that “Harland’s ’ill build a bigger one again.” “Certainly they will,” Hugh agrees facetiously, “they’ll put a slipway under Belfast and launch the whole cursed city into the river—after the people have all been shot by the Army—for refusing to obey orders and abandon ship” (48). When a bigoted English stoker asks them if they are Irish, Danny replies defensively that they “come from the shipyard,” but the man makes no distinction between them and the other “paddies” he has persecuted over the years (55–56).

Danny is portrayed as being in some ways more intellectual than Hugh—he is always quoting poetry and musing over the meanings, sounds, and associations of words, for example, and he is commended on his work by Thomas Andrews himself—but he is more naïve politically. Although he mouths clichés about the Southern Irish, it is obvious that he feels more at home with third-class Cork passengers Molly and Rosaleen (he cites Thomas Moore and Shakespeare with equal facility) than with anyone else they encounter on the ship. Hugh, who maintains that—unlike Danny, who “would have gone far”—he himself was “only fit to drive rivets” (42), is nonetheless feeling his way toward a radical critique of the interlocked systems of capitalism, imperialism, and Unionism, envisioning a unity of interest among workmen of all sorts. “[I]f you’ve four or five thousand men building a ship,” Danny argues, “it stands to reason some of them’ll have accidents. There’s men killed on every ship.” “Why? For what?” asks Hugh (63). His questions hang unanswered over the end of *The Iceberg*, but perhaps the moment of collision is what the two men have been expecting all along, the “something” that will “happen to clear it all up” (19). For if the *Titanic* is the ship of state, a microcosm of an unjust society, then all that the wealthy passengers on board can see is the tip of the iceberg, and sooner or later the vessel is doomed to founder on the submerged aspirations of the mass of the population.



Parker’s first professionally produced stage play, *Spokesong*, was directed by Michael Heffernan, the director of *The Iceberg*, and premiered at the 1975 Dublin Theatre Festival. In it, as in the radio play, Parker drew on local history, though *Spokesong* also deals explicitly with the violence of the early 1970s in Belfast. Parker explained around the time of the play’s Broadway opening that in trying “to isolate what is at the heart of the turbulence in Ireland at the moment,” he deliberately “decided against writing a play about Protestants and Catholics fighting each other, or another play about the I.R.A.” To do that, he felt, would be to deal only with the surface; the “core,” he believed, had to do with how people perceive their history, the past, and what sort of relationship they establish with it.³⁵ “The thing that obsesses

³⁵Robert Berkvist, “A Freewheeling Play about Irish History,” *New York Times*, March 11, 1979.

me,” he told an interviewer in 1976, “is the link between the past and the present. How do you cope with the present when the past is still unfinished?”³⁶

The first challenge Parker faced was a formal one. As he recalled in 1979, “I had to make manageable the subject of contemporary Irish politics and the nature of the violence I’ve lived through in Belfast for the past 10 years [...]. And I wanted to do it in such a way that the audience would be taken completely by surprise, caught without its preconceptions. I decided that the way to do that was to write a play about the history of the bicycle—because that is the most unlikely way in the world to get into the subject of Northern Ireland.” The historical connection between Belfast and bicycles hinges on John Boyd Dunlop’s invention of the pneumatic tire there in 1887, which allowed cyclists literally to ride on air. “That’s just a bit of folklore you know if you grow up there,” Parker explained, “along with the fact that the Titanic was built there.”³⁷ Moreover, he observed in 1985, “it is an aspect of social history which runs (I can put it no other way) in tandem with the political history of the Unionist/Nationalist ideological divide, in an uncanny and provocative fashion.” The period from Dunlop’s innovation to the early 1970s “encompasses the end of Parnellism, Randolph Churchill and the Orange Card, the Home Rule Bills, the Great War, Partition, and so on, right up to Bloody Sunday and Bloody Friday.”³⁸

It is what Parker called the bicycle “conceit”³⁹ that made *Spokesong* so startlingly original in 1975 and keeps it fresh even today. The play is set in a bicycle shop founded by Francis Stock in 1895 and run now by his grandson Frank. This family business is under siege both from republican and loyalist bombers, who will either blow it up or demand money to “protect” it, and from city planners who want to tear it down as part of a scheme to build motorways through the center of town. Parker’s first stage direction explains that “the action takes place in Belfast, Northern Ireland, during the early 1970’s and the eighty years preceding them.”⁴⁰ Scenes alternate between the past,

³⁶ Gardner, “Too Many People Have Writing in the Head.”

³⁷ Berkvist, “Freewheeling Play.”

³⁸ Parker, “Signposts,” 28.

³⁹ Berkvist, “Freewheeling Play.”

⁴⁰ Stewart Parker, *Spokesong* (New York: Samuel French, 1980), 8. Further references to this edition of the play will be cited by page number in the text.

in which Francis (an “Empire Loyalist”) woos and wins his beloved Kitty (a “Maud-Gonne-style Nationalist” and radical feminist), and the present, in which the starry-eyed Frank courts a practical school-teacher named Daisy Bell.⁴¹

An ambiguous character called the Trick Cyclist mediates between past and present, presiding over the action onstage, taking a number of parts, and singing most of the songs. In dress and deportment he recalls the variety act, a popular form of working-class entertainment in late Victorian and early-twentieth-century Belfast, and Parker said he conceived of the Trick Cyclist as a Chorus figure embodying “the spirit of Belfast.”⁴² This “spirit” is often repressive, as evidenced by a sampling of the roles the character assumes: the Reverend Peacock, who is scandalized by the sight of Kitty in “bifurcated garments”; Kitty’s father, who disowns her for marrying a “bicycle tradesman”; the inspector chairing the inquiry into the motorway scheme, who is, Frank says, so determined not to make a fool of himself that he has “admitted his imagination into the morgue” as a precaution; and Daisy’s father, “Tinker” Bell, head of the local Protestant paramilitary organization, who hits Frank up for contributions to the cause and “goes in every Friday to collect his dole money with an armed bodyguard” (16, 36, 33, 53). On a more positive note, the Trick Cyclist represents antic playfulness, a delight in language for its own sake that Parker also perceived in Belfast culture; and the songs that he sings, parodying the styles of distinct musical eras in turn, help to reinforce the illusion that the action takes place over a period of eighty years. Parker recalled ten years later, “I felt that I had at long last found a way of embracing the whole city, my city, in this play.”⁴³

The year before *Spokesong* opened, Parker had contributed to a Schools series on “People at Work.” The producer, Tony McAuley, had offered him the rare opportunity to write a fictional story about any occupation he chose and had been surprised and delighted when Parker decided to focus on the city workers who were planting flowers around the center of Belfast, even as it was subject to constant bomb attacks.⁴⁴ In *Spokesong*, Frank Stock is the “spokesman” for a similar

⁴¹ Parker, “Signposts,” 28.

⁴² Berkvist, “Freewheeling Play.”

⁴³ Parker, “Signposts,” 28.

⁴⁴ Tony McAuley, interview by the author, Belfast, Northern Ireland, November 14, 1998.

naïve optimism, daring to imagine a future in a city that seems consumed by past and present Troubles. He runs the local community association that is opposing the motorway scheme, and the play opens with him presenting an alternative plan before the panel assembled to hear reactions to the road proposal. Frank advocates free bicycles distributed around the city center to minimize the population's reliance on cars. For him, the issue is people's control over their own lives. "So far as personal transport goes," he rhapsodizes, "the bicycle was the last advance in technology that everybody understands." In contrast, the fateful invention of the internal combustion engine put people "at the mercy of alien machines, mysteries for other people to solve" (19). As a reviewer for *Time* magazine summed it up, in Frank's view of the world "the bicycle stands for sweet-souled individual freedom and the automobile for arrogant mass tyranny."⁴⁵ Frank's argument makes a strong appeal in a city in which the threat of car bombs is ever-present. "Christ on a bicycle," Frank reflects:

You can see that. You can't see him driving a Jaguar. Or an Avenger. Or a Sting-ray. A car is just a hard shell of aggression, for the soft urban mollusc to secrete itself in. It's a form of disguise. All its parts are hidden. No wonder they're using them as bombs. It's a logical development. A bicycle hides nothing and threatens nothing. It is what it does, its form is its function. An automobile is a weapon of war. (42)

Ian Hill, a friend of Parker's from university days, observed in a review of the Lyric Theatre's 1989 production of *Spokesong* that "to have known Parker is to see him in Frank: the wryness, the self mockery, the eclectic use of arcane and academic wordplay, the prevailing pervading love affair with a city of picture palaces and brown-shop-coated tradesmen, which was to fall as much to the fly-over planner as to the terrorist."⁴⁶ While there is considerable truth to this claim, Parker was also aware of the limitations of his protagonist's point of view. Frank's nostalgic vision of the past is exemplified by the relationship between Francis and Kitty, who have nothing in common apart from their shared passion for bicycles, which, as Parker noted, "is a form of love for humanity itself."⁴⁷

That remark would seem to suggest that love can conquer all, that

⁴⁵ T. E. Kalem, "Wheelborne," *Time*, February 27, 1978.

⁴⁶ Ian Hill, "Spokesong," *Guardian*, September 9, 1989.

⁴⁷ Parker, "Signposts," 28.

personal relationships can outweigh the bitterness of a divisive history and politics. It is important to remember, however, that these grandparents, idealized and lovable exponents of the Unionist and Nationalist positions that took enduring shape at the end of the nineteenth century, appear to us only through Frank's romantic memory and imagination.⁴⁸ His cynical adopted brother, Julian, who competes with him for Daisy's affections, protests that "[t]hey weren't in the smallest degree like that. [...] He was a vain and obsequious little Ulster tradesman, a crank and a bore, going over and over the same dog-eared tales of his youth and his war-experiences. [...] She was a spoiled daughter of the regiment, slumming it in the quaint backstreets and in her ridiculous lace-curtain nationalism" (60).

Frank is a humanist who wants desperately to see the best in people, but in order to keep Daisy he is forced to acknowledge some of the harder realities of Belfast life. The last major scene between Frank and the Trick Cyclist is an "exorcism" of Francis and Kitty, which entails, for Frank, the amputation of a part of his former identity and a modification of his philosophy. Life is not as simple as the bicycle being good and cars being bad; any technology is only as benign or destructive as the use to which it is put by humans.⁴⁹ Jonathan Bardon points out that even Dunlop's invention had unforeseen consequences: "though devised as an improvement for the bicycle, [it] was made just in time to ensure the success of the motor car."⁵⁰ Daisy, for her part, vacillates between Julian's witty nihilism and Frank's impractical idealism, finally deciding that, no matter how bleak the present may be, the future will be worse if people stop appealing to the best qualities in each other. *Spokesong* ends with Frank and Daisy pedaling offstage on a bicycle built for two that has the air of a *deux et machina*. It is an upbeat and emotionally satisfying conclusion rather desperately appended to a play that has illustrated so well the intractable problem facing Frank and the other modern characters of how to master the uncompleted history of Belfast.



⁴⁸ Robert Gillespie, "The Play's Director, Talking to the Editors," in *Spokesong: or, The Common Wheel*, ed. Jop Spiekerman and Nora Schadee (The Hague: Wikor, 1977), 7–9.

⁴⁹ Gillespie, "Play's Director," 11–13.

⁵⁰ Bardon, *Belfast*, 135.

Parker took a far less compromising approach to the same problem in *Northern Star* (1984), which is set in “Ireland, the continuous past.”⁵¹ In this play, it is the unfinished business of Irish republicanism that engrosses Parker. *Northern Star* focuses on the United Irishmen, instigators of the 1798 rebellion and the original Irish republicans—that is, the first modern revolutionaries to envision a future for Ireland as an entity independent of Great Britain. The United Irishmen inspired, among others, the Young Irelanders (cultural nationalists of the 1840s led by Thomas Davis), the Fenians (physical force nationalists of the mid-nineteenth century), the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood (organizers of the Easter Rising in 1916), the Irish Republican Army, and the Provisionals. As historian Kevin Whelan eloquently puts it, the 1798 rebellion “never passed into history, because it never passed out of politics.”⁵² Consequently, historical interpretations of the formative 1790s in Ireland have always themselves been deeply political.

In the immediate aftermath of 1798 and through the nineteenth century, for example, conservative Protestants, Whig liberals, repentant United Irishmen, Catholic leaders such as Daniel O’Connell, and later the Catholic Church itself—all for reasons of their own—contributed to a view of the rebellion as a spontaneous Catholic uprising against persecution by the Orange Order and the government of the day. This construction focused on County Wexford, where the largest battles had taken place, and it fit well with popular nineteenth-century Irish cultural nationalism, which had come to identify the “nation” with Irish Catholicism; but it distorted the actual character of the ill-fated revolution as a culmination of years of political activism on the part of the United Irishmen.⁵³ Two hundred years after the event, a new historical consensus has emerged that recognizes the 1798 rebellion as a mass-based, ideologically driven, and largely Protestant-led affair. Parker, who started researching the United Irishmen in the late 1960s and wrote *Northern Star* in the early 1980s, did not have the benefit of this most recent scholarship. Nevertheless, his work anticipated that of the historians who have labored to recover the secular, egalitarian political ideals of the United Irishmen.

⁵¹ Stewart Parker, *Three Plays for Ireland* (Birmingham: Oberon, 1989), 13.

⁵² Kevin Whelan, *The Tree of Liberty: Radicalism, Catholicism, and the Construction of Irish Identity, 1760–1830* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1996), 133.

⁵³ Whelan, *Tree of Liberty*, 133–75.

Specifically, Parker wanted to restore the Belfast dimension of the 1798 rebellion to popular memory. This locus of revolutionary thinking and activity had been eclipsed by the long focus on Wexford and Dublin, especially in the Republic of Ireland, even though many of the most radical leaders of the United Irishmen—Samuel Neilson, Thomas Russell, James Hope, and Henry Joy McCracken, for example—were based in Belfast. Theobald Wolfe Tone, the most celebrated of the United Irishmen, came from Dublin but was closely affiliated with this Belfast wing of the movement and spent time in the North. Incredibly, given the political context of Parker's own lifetime (when working-class Protestants were likely to be the staunchest of unionists), these founders of Irish republicanism were also, in the main, Presbyterians. In putting them at the heart of his drama, Parker was sending a direct message to his fellow Northern Protestants: deny it though they might, they had a republican heritage. By placing the likes of McCracken center stage, Parker was also signaling his dissatisfaction with the version of Irish history that had written Protestants out of the story of the nation. Lynne Parker, the playwright's niece, who directed the Rough Magic Theatre Company in a 1996 production of *Northern Star*, noted the disorienting effect that this re-centering had on Dublin theatergoers, many of whom might never have heard of the Belfast leaders.⁵⁴

McCracken is the protagonist of *Northern Star*, and Parker clearly felt a special affinity with him. Apart from being a gifted mimic (a detail Parker cherished), McCracken was a model of disinterested leadership who stuck by the cause when most others had deserted it, taking command of the entire Army of the North after the arrest or resignation of more senior leaders a mere three days before the rising was due to begin. With few men and little support, he performed creditably on the field of battle until, ironically, his reinforcements were routed by an enemy retreat, causing his own troops to flee in panic. He was apparently without sectarian prejudice; and, perhaps most important to Parker, he understood and sympathized with the problems of ordinary working people despite his middle-class background. All of these characteristics helped to make McCracken an ideal filter for Parker's own perspective on the United Irishmen, which was colored by his secular and socialist politics.

⁵⁴Lynne Parker, interview by the author, Dublin, July 18, 1997.

In Parker's opinion, the truly radical contribution of the United Irishmen was a new response to the question, "What did it mean to be Irish?" His McCracken answers,

It meant to be dispossessed, to live on ground that isn't ours, Protestant, Catholic, Dissenter, the whole motley crew of us, planted together in this soil to which we've no proper title ...

[...] Look at me. My great-grandfather Joy was a French Huguenot, my great-grandfather McCracken was a Scottish Covenanter, persecuted, the pair of them, driven here from the shores of home, their home but not my home, because I'm Henry Joy McCracken and here to stay, a natural son of Belfast, as Irish a bastard as all the other incomers, blown into this port by the storm of history, Gaelic or Danish or Anglo-Norman, without distinction, it makes no odds, every mother's son of us children of nature on this sodden glorious patch of earth, unpossessed of deed or inheritance, without distinction.⁵⁵

Before the United Irish movement, members of the essentially Anglican Protestant Ascendancy had defined themselves as the Irish nation in a fashion that excluded both Catholics and Dissenters from the full privileges of citizenship. After the failure of the rebellion, and largely through the agency of O'Connell's massive campaigns for Catholic emancipation and the repeal of the Act of Union, Irish nationalism became almost indistinguishable from Catholic nationalism.⁵⁶ Looking back on the United Irishmen from the vantage point of late-twentieth-century Belfast, Parker saw an extraordinary achievement in their successful, though short-lived, decoupling of a sense of the Irish nation from sectarian allegiance.

Yet Parker's attitude toward the United men was far from reverential. Although he was sympathetic to their original goal of "a cordial union among *all the people of Ireland*,"⁵⁷ Parker believed that their ultimate decision to pursue political ends by military means was a mistake that would inevitably, as one of his characters says, "spread the very disease it was meant to cure" (53). The United Irishmen, he suggests, were responsible not only for the ideal of republicanism, but also for its tradition of violence. Whatever their intentions, the leaders of the rebellion were not always able to control the forces they helped

⁵⁵ Stewart Parker, *Northern Star*, in *Three Plays for Ireland*, 16–17. Further references to this edition of the play will be cited by page number in the text.

⁵⁶ Whelan, *Tree of Liberty*, 152–53.

⁵⁷ Jonathan Bardon, *A History of Ulster* (Belfast: Blackstaff, 1992), 220.

to set in motion. Well-publicized massacres at Scullabogue and Wexford Bridge, for example, cooled the ardor of liberal Protestants for Catholic emancipation and contributed to a reaction against the idea of an Irish nation that could contain all the separate strands of Irish society.

In Parker's view, a man of McCracken's generous spirit could not have failed to see that the legacy of the United Irishmen might not be entirely positive. The action of *Northern Star* takes place during one of McCracken's last nights as a free man, before his capture, trial, and execution. Looking back on the entire United movement with the benefit of hindsight, Parker's McCracken worries that

all we've done [...] is to reinforce the locks, cram the cells fuller than ever of mangled bodies crawling round in their own shite and lunacy, and the cycle just goes on, playing out the same demented comedy of terrors from generation to generation, trapped in the same malignant legend, condemned to re-endure it as if the Anti-Christ who dreamed it up was driven astray in the wits by it and the entire pattern of depravity just goes spinning on out of control, on and on, round and round, till the day the world itself is burst asunder, that's the handsome birthright that we're handing on at the end of all ... (65).

Parker's interpretation of the 1790s in Ireland was obviously shaped by his experience of the 1970s, and the script of *Northern Star* is replete with parallels to the contemporary Troubles. An ironic mention of "O'Neill, the great moderate reformer" (43), for example, refers ostensibly to Lord O'Neill, "once the darling of the Presbyterian freeholders now in combat against him,"⁵⁸ but inescapably stirs up echoes of Captain Terence O'Neill, the prime minister of Northern Ireland in the late 1960s, whose attempts to liberalize the province were too little, too late. Toward the end of the play, a scene depicting McCracken and some of his fellow conspirators in prison employs imagery deliberately reminiscent of the dirty protest and hunger strikes of contemporary republican prisoners, while a graphic interrogation scene depicts, anachronistically, the government's use of bright lights and white noise on detainees. The implication, by extension, is that the doubts expressed by McCracken about the efficacy of violence might apply equally to the more self-scrutinizing of modern insurgents. Parker's message in 1984 was that support for civil rights, so-

⁵⁸ Bardon, *History of Ulster*, 233.

cial justice, and a more equitable society in Ireland need not, indeed should not, translate into uncritical support for everything done by those who claim to act in the name of republicanism.

The structure of *Northern Star* is integral to its meaning. Parker alternates “confessional” scenes between McCracken and his lover Mary Bodle with “rhetorical” flashback scenes of the events leading up to the rising. In the latter, Parker imitates the styles of great Irish playwrights in turn: Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Dion Boucicault, Oscar Wilde, George Bernard Shaw, J. M. Synge, Sean O’Casey, Brendan Behan, and Samuel Beckett, with nods to others thrown in for good measure. This multiplicity of voices underlines Parker’s pluralistic vision of Irish identity while simultaneously commenting on the fact that the past and present in Ireland continue to shape each other. Parker remarked in 1985, “You start speaking about an event that happened in Derry last week and immediately voices of 1641 are clamouring to be heard.” The technique of pastiche, he explained, “allowed me to march the play throughout the decades towards the present day and say to the audience, forget about historical veracity, forget about realism, I’m going to tell you a story about the origins of Republicanism and I’m going to offer you a point of view on what’s gone wrong with it and why it’s become corrupt and why it’s now serving the opposite ends to what it set out to serve, and I’m going to demonstrate this like a ventriloquist, using a variety of voices.”⁵⁹ In the words of critic Fintan O’Toole, the form of *Northern Star* reminds us that “the events of 1798 are still being, literally, played out”: “An extraordinary tension is created by the way the styles of writing and performance move forward in time from the 18th century to the 20th. In terms of content, we are looking back on Henry Joy’s tragic dilemmas. In terms of style, they are rushing forward to meet us.”⁶⁰

The line “Citizens of Belfast,” repeated like a refrain throughout *Northern Star*, plays on this double valence of the unfolding action. It is aimed both at McCracken’s imaginary audience as he rehearses his “famous last words” (15) and at the real-life citizens of Belfast who Parker hoped would be in the theater audience. (Lynne Parker concluded after directing *Northern Star* in Dublin that it was a quintessential

⁵⁹ Quoted in Ciaran Carty, “Northern Star Rising on the Tide,” *Sunday Tribune*, September 29, 1985.

⁶⁰ Fintan O’Toole, “Second Opinion,” *Irish Times*, October 12, 1996.

“Belfast play” that could not possibly have the same resonance anywhere else.) In McCracken’s last long speech, love and longing mingle with apprehension regarding the future:

Why would one place break your heart, more than another? A place the like of that? Brain-damaged and dangerous, continuously violating itself, a place of perpetual breakdown, incompatible voices, screeching obscenely away through the smoky dark wet. Burnt out and still burning. Nerve-damaged, pitiable. Frightening. As maddening and tiresome as any other pain-obsessed cripple. And yet what would this poor fool not give to be able to walk freely again from Stranmillis down to Ann Street ... cut through Pottinger’s Entry and across the road for a drink in Peggy’s ... to dander on down Waring Street and examine the shipping along the river, and back on up to our old house ... we can’t love it for what it is, only for what it might have been, if we’d got it right, if we’d made it whole. If. It’s a ghost town now and always will be, angry and implacable ghosts. Me condemned to be one of their number. We never made a nation. Our brainchild. Stillborn. Our own fault. We botched the birth. So what if the English do bequeath us to one another some day? What then? When there’s nobody else to blame except ourselves? (75)

The ending of the play holds out only as much hope as audience members can find in themselves and each other. McCracken mounts the platform one last time and places a noose around his neck. “Citizens of Belfast ...” he begins, but gets no further before the beating of a lambeg drum (symbol of twentieth-century unionist triumphalism) drowns out his words and the lights fade to black. In contrast to *Spokesong*, Parker refuses the neat resolution of any ending, let alone a happy one. What he offers instead is a bleak but bracing challenge to the audience to arrest the cycle of retribution.



Parker’s stage play *Pentecost* (1987) must be seen as a counterbalance to *Northern Star*. Together they form part of a common enterprise for the playwright, what he described as a “triptych” of plays set in Ireland in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries.⁶¹ *Northern Star* and *Pentecost* have more in common with each other than with the middle play in the series—*Heavenly Bodies* (1986), an exploration of

⁶¹ Parker, *Three Plays for Ireland*, 9.

the life and times of the Victorian melodramatist Dion Boucicault—by virtue of the fact that both center on Belfast. In addition, *Northern Star* and *Pentecost* place particular emphasis on aspects of Northern Protestant consciousness and mentality. The imagery evoked by McCracken's valediction to the audience in *Northern Star* is reiterated and expanded in *Pentecost*, as are McCracken's hopes and fears for the future. Both plays encourage Northern Protestants and Catholics to start seeing the culture and aspirations they share instead of only the characteristics that divide them, but both remain crucially unresolved at the final blackout.

Despite these affinities, audiences and readers are likely to find the differences between the two plays more striking initially. In contrast to *Northern Star*'s virtuoso theatricality, *Pentecost* is the most naturalistic stage play that Parker ever wrote. If McCracken refers metaphorically to dead babies and angry ghosts, in *Pentecost* these tropes take literal form. *Northern Star* concerns itself with the public and political to an extent unusual in Parker's work, while *Pentecost* portrays the private anguish of its characters against a background of civil crisis. *Northern Star* is dominated by male characters; *Pentecost* is anchored by its women. Perhaps most important, in *Pentecost* the despair expressed by McCracken yields finally to a tentative optimism.

Parker regarded both of these works as "history plays." In *Northern Star* the challenge had been to make a rebellion that took place nearly two hundred years previously seem relevant to modern audiences. In *Pentecost*, on the other hand, Parker was attempting to treat historically certain contemporary events that he himself had lived through. He decided that a style of "heightened realism" was "most appropriate for my own generation, finally making its own scruffy way onto the stage of history and from thence into the future tense."⁶² The play is set in Belfast at a time when violence and intimidation won out over what had looked to many people to be a promising political settlement (one not unlike the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, in fact). During the Ulster Workers' Council (UWC) strike of 1974, militant Protestant workers managed to topple the power-sharing executive intended to replace direct rule from London with local authority divided between Protestants and Catholics. Hard-line loyalists objected both to power sharing and to the "Irish dimension" of the agreement.

⁶² Parker, *Three Plays for Ireland*, 10.

Their strike began with closing factories and shutting off the power supply and proceeded with threats to the water and sewage systems before the Unionist members of the executive resigned, thus ending the experiment in self-government. The action of *Pentecost* takes place before, during, and immediately after the UWC strike, which Parker remembered as “one of the most hopeless moments” of the recent Irish past.⁶³

The first stage direction of *Northern Star* describes the setting as a “half-built and half-derelict” cottage on the slopes of Belfast’s Cave-hill,⁶⁴ a visual reminder of the uncompleted and discredited project of the United Irishmen. *Pentecost* also takes place in a typical working-class dwelling, in the “downstairs back part of a respectable [...] ‘parlour’ house” in Belfast. This house was the home of the recently deceased Lily Matthews, whose life story is archetypal of working-class Protestant experience in that city during the twentieth century. She moved into it as a bride of eighteen the same week that her husband, Alfie, returned from World War I (alive but impotent), was burned out of it during the sectarian disturbances of 1921, and returned to endure the Depression, the Blitz, and the tormenting memory of her infidelity to Alfie during the year that he spent looking for work in England. Stage directions make it clear that the house has absorbed the personality of its long-time occupant:

The rooms are narrow, but the walls climb up and disappear into the shadows above the stage. The kitchen in particular is cluttered, almost suffocated, with the furnishings and bric-a-brac of the first half of the century, all the original fixtures and fittings still being in place. But in spite of now being shabby, musty, threadbare, it has all clearly been the object of a desperate, lifelong struggle for cleanliness, tidiness, orderliness—godliness.⁶⁵

This parlor house is the only one left inhabited on the whole street, stranded in the middle of what amounts to a war zone between Protestant and Catholic ghettos. As if that were not bad enough, one of the characters remarks, “the very road itself is scheduled to vanish off

⁶³Quoted in Francis X. Clines, “Theater Crosses Borders in Ireland, Fueled by the Troubles and a Love of Language,” *New York Times*, September 27, 1987.

⁶⁴Parker, *Three Plays for Ireland*, 13.

⁶⁵Stewart Parker, *Pentecost*, in *Three Plays for Ireland*, 147. Further references to this edition of the play will be cited by page number in the text.

the map” since it is “the middle of a redevelopment zone” (154). Besieged by the resurgence of past animosities and an uncertain future alike, the house is a physical embodiment of the working-class loyalism that is responsible for the turmoil in the streets outside it.

The current occupants of the house—two male, two female; two Protestant, two Catholic; all in their late twenties or early thirties—are forced in the course of the play to come to terms with the cultural and political legacy of the kind of Northern Protestantism represented by Lily Matthews and the UWC strikers, respectively. Lenny Harri-gan, a shiftless musician from a middle-class Catholic background, inherited the house from his aunt, but it has only just come into his possession after the death of Lily, the sitting tenant. He agrees to sell the house and all of its contents to his estranged wife, Marian, in exchange for a divorce. She immediately takes up residence, but soon he is staying there too, much to her displeasure, after a burglary at his flat. Ruth, a Protestant friend of Marian’s from their days on the Northern Ireland youth swimming team who is in flight from her abusive policeman husband, and Peter, a friend of Lenny’s from university days and the son of a Methodist minister, have also taken refuge in the house by the end of the first act. Through the characters’ interactions with one another, Parker illustrates a range of possible responses to the pressures of the Troubles.

Peter serves as the mouthpiece for many of Parker’s own sentiments from the time of *Pentecost*’s setting, though the reactions of the others to Peter register the playwright’s ironic distance from his younger self by the time he came to write the play. *Pentecost* is self-consciously a period piece, filled not only with references to the tense political situation and the sounds of distant explosions, Orange bands, and military helicopters, but also with allusions to the counter-culture of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Peter’s stories about the student unrest he witnessed at an American university and the plan that he and Lenny had to end the Northern crisis by dumping LSD into Belfast’s reservoir and thus “turn[ing] on the population, comprehensively,” his “1974 casual chic” clothing and anglicized accent, and the heavy sack of muesli that he lugs with him from his new home in Birmingham all mark him out as the most cosmopolitan of the characters (184–85, 200–201, 169). Peter confesses that he suffers from a disease he calls exilephilia, “whatever the direct opposite of homesickness is. [...] [t]he desperate nagging pain of longing to be far, far away,” but

he has been drawn back by the spectacle of “[h]istoric days in Lilliput” and a nostalgia for the “authentic Lilliputian wit” (186, 170–71). When Lenny asks him whether he intends to call Northern Ireland “Lilliput” for the duration of his unanticipated visit, Peter responds with a tirade: “What, this teeny weeny wee province of ours and its little people, all the angry munchkins, with their midget brains, this festering pimple on the vast white flabby bum of western Europe, what would *you* call it?” “I call it home,” Lenny answers drily (171–72).

Later, as Peter continues to taunt Lenny with his seeming inability to make “the great escape” from Belfast, Lenny flares up at him: “I’ll live whatever life I choose, and I’ll live it here, what’s it to you, you think you’re any further on? You seriously think I’d want what you have?” (173, 206). Ruth, whose own unionism has been reinforced by her experience of several years of violence, accuses Peter of not knowing his “own” people any more: “You have no notion how they feel, you opted out. You lost touch. You see it all like the English now, ‘a plague on both their houses’ ... easy to say when it isn’t your own house that’s in mortal danger” (185). Despite Peter’s abrasiveness and, at times, silliness (Marian refers to him as “that trend-worshipping narcissist”), his view of the loyalist strike is essentially clear-headed. He sees it as “a lingering tribal suicide” and believes that the past five years’ worth of destruction could have been avoided if the Unionists, who had “held all the cards,” had only been “marginally generous” to the oppressed Catholic population (191, 184). The loyalist victory, when it comes, causes him finally to break down and admit that he, too, is implicated in what happens in Belfast, that part of himself will always be missing anywhere else.

Each of the other characters experiences a similar moment of truth: Ruth resolves to leave her husband for good this time; Lenny realizes that his wife was as devastated as he was by the end of their marriage. But it is Marian who is the pivotal character in *Pentecost*, the one who changes most profoundly in the course of the play. She comes across at first as a brusque and bitter woman, so preoccupied with her own personal crisis as to be indifferent to the political trauma. Five years ago, in August 1969 (a “vintage month,” as Peter points out), she and Lenny lost their child to sudden infant death syndrome. This event was the beginning of the end of their marriage, and at the start of act 1 they have been separated for close to two years. She has suddenly decided to sell her antiques business and her flat, and she buys

the house from Lenny as a retreat from everyone and everything that has constituted her life up to now. What she is really trying to get away from, though, is herself. Through the action of the play, she becomes a person open to the possibility of positive transformation.

Marian is an individual woman captured by Parker at a moment of radical transition, but she is also representative of the first generation of Northern Catholics coming into their own in a province that had been organized for the express purpose of excluding them. Her function on this level is underlined by the fact that she is the only one of the living characters able to communicate with the dead Lily Matthews. Lily, who a reviewer for the *Belfast Newsletter* said “could be anyone’s Gran from east Belfast,”⁶⁶ appears as a character in the play, though Parker does not specify whether she should be regarded as a ghost or as a personification of Marian’s inner voice. She objects vehemently to having an “idolater” living in her house and spends the first half of the play trying to scare Marian into leaving, without success. In *Northern Star* it was the Protestant Henry Joy McCracken who announced that he was “here to stay”; in *Pentecost* Marian tells Lily, “You think you’re haunting me, don’t you. But you see it’s me that’s actually haunting you. I’m not going to go away. There’s no curse or hymn that can exorcise me. So you might as well just give me your blessing and make your peace with me” (180).

Lily never does accept Marian’s right to be there, but in their successive scenes she gradually opens up to the younger woman until the secret that deformed her life is at last laid bare. In Alfie’s absence she gave birth alone to an illegitimate child, the result of her brief affair with their lodger, and abandoned the baby on the porch of a Baptist church. For over forty years she was “condemned to life” in that house, her judgmental rectitude a façade erected to conceal her own deep sense of depravity (202). She was, she says,

all consumed by my own wickedness, on the inside, nothing left but the shell of me, for appearance’s sake . . . still and all. At least I never let myself down—never cracked. Never surrendered. Not one inch. I went to my grave a respectable woman, Mrs Alfred George Matthews, I never betrayed him. That was the way I atoned, you see. I done him proud. He never knew any reason to be ashamed of me, or doubt my loyalty. (196)

⁶⁶ *Belfast Newsletter*, September 28, 1987.

Parker suggests that it is self-loathing, projected as hatred of other people, that is at the root of any human conflict, including the Northern crisis. Marian, at the beginning of the play, is in danger of becoming like Lily herself. When the latter asks her to stay away from where she is not welcome, Marian explains that she has a problem complying with the request, “seeing as the place where I’m least welcome of all is the inside of my own skull . . . so there’s something we can agree on at least, Lily. I don’t like me either” (157). She has come to the house in the first place to avoid human contact, and she reacts unsympathetically to the misfortunes that bring Lenny and Ruth to her door. Marian even starts to sound like Lily, complaining to Lenny about the “filth and mess and noise and bickering, in every last corner.” When he worries aloud that she may not be fit to be left alone, she rounds on him: “It wouldn’t maybe have occurred to you, it wouldn’t maybe have penetrated even that dim featherweight brain—that being on my own is the one thing I am fit for?” (191).

After provoking Lily into admitting her soul-destroying secret, Marian starts to turn around. When she asks Lily’s forgiveness at the end of their last scene, she finally begins to forgive herself. Marian’s growing empathy for the dead Lily, accompanied by the realization that many of the Protestant woman’s wounds were self-inflicted, results in a resolve not only to avoid becoming Lily but also to free the older woman from the burden of her past. Midway through the play, Marian had conceived the idea of offering the house and its contents, the artifacts of Lily’s life, to the National Trust as a representative example of Belfast working-class culture. By the end she has decided that this “wrong impulse” would only have had the effect of “condemning [Lily] to life indefinitely.” Instead, she wants to live in the house, clearing it out, giving it the light and air it needs (202). Rather than turning into Lily, Marian will carry her into the future, along with the memory of her own dead son, Christopher. The play ends in a kind of secular pentecost, as Marian speaks of rebirth and renewal in a manner that transcends the discord and division dramatized in the last two scenes of the play. “Personally,” she declares,

I want to live now. I want this house to live. We have committed sacrilege enough on life, in this place, in these times. We don’t just owe it to ourselves, we owe it to our dead too . . . our innocent dead. They’re not our masters, they’re only our creditors, for the life they never knew. We owe them at least that—the fullest life for which they could ever

have hoped, we carry those ghosts within us, to betray those hopes is the real sin against the christ, and I for one cannot commit it one day longer. (208)

The lights gradually fade on a moment of hesitant communion among the four characters onstage, as Lenny and Peter improvise a version of “Just a Closer Walk with Thee” on trombone and banjo in response to Marian’s words, and Ruth finds a Christian equivalent in the Acts of the Apostles: “Therefore did my heart rejoice, and my tongue was glad; moreover also my flesh shall rest in hope [...]. Thou hast made known to me the ways of life” (208). In the final moments of the play, Ruth reaches across to open the window, symbolizing the new openness of the characters to each other and to the future.

Throughout *Pentecost* Parker carefully preserves the possibility that there is a rational explanation for Lily’s presence onstage. To explain how Marian comes to know the most intimate details of the dead woman’s life, he has her find an old diary of Lily’s under the cellar stairs. At first glance, this discovery may seem to be the most transparent of plot devices; but on another level, the fact that Marian learns to see the humanity in Lily through reading her reflections is a poignant allusion to the power of the written word to lift us out of ourselves, to alter perception and foster understanding. In fact, Parker’s entire career, by means of which he deliberately wed himself to his native place through an imaginative engagement with its history, was a declaration of faith in people’s capacity to be educated into tolerance and appreciation of one another.

In *Dramatis Personae*, a lecture delivered in 1986, Parker reaffirmed his belief in the value of drama and offered his vision of what a playwright could do for Belfast:

[I]f ever a time and place cried out for the solace and rigour and passionate rejoinder of great drama, it is here and now. There is a whole culture to be achieved. The politicians, visionless almost to a man, are withdrawing into their sectarian stockades. It falls to the artists to construct a working model of wholeness by means of which this society can begin to hold up its head in the world.⁶⁷

Pentecost was Parker’s most determined attempt to construct such a model. All the more tragic, then, that it also turned out to be his last.

⁶⁷ Parker, *Dramatis Personae*, 19.

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