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Two O'Casey Letters

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SEAN O'CASEY (1880-1964) was nothing if not a canny judge of his own epistologies. In the last year of his life he wrote Albert Tenor: "Maybe, as you suggest, I shall be remembered more for my biography¹ than for the plays; or, even for my letters, now being collected by Dr. Krause,² and numbering 2000, than for the plays." It is unlikely that O'Casey's letters will ever overshadow The Plough and the Stars, Juno and the Paycock, The Silver Tassie, or his irrepressible autobiography, but there is substance in the point he is slyly promoting: his letters are undeniably notable. In this one, for instance, he swings without strain into an engagingly humanistic line: "or maybe I shall be quickly forgotten. It doesn't really matter a damn: all I hope is that I may be remembered kindly by all those near and dear to me, and by my friends 'til they go, and are forgotten, too."³

In the main, assertive opinion overlapped by faint melancholy, detraction, and sentimental tenderness, delivered with candor and dash, may be said to characterize his epistolary trend. The two letters, appearing below, further disclose his general propensities: the lively wit and brusque honesty; the contempt for current conditions and modes; the ambivalent feeling toward ambivalent Ireland; the salty word, the racy phrase, the lyric glide; self-defense and self-deprecation; the fondness for anecdote; the unending war in him between mysticism and pragmatism, love-wish versus death wish; the electric shifts of tone and view. O'Casey affects no mandarin highstyle in his letters. The prose is familiar yet distinctive, bold, cursive, pungent, elate. He creates an ambience of crackling immediacy, homely concern, appreciation, and intellectual bonhomie. He

¹ O'Casey issued segments of his autobiography under six titles between 1939 and 1954, which were collected in two volumes entitled Mirror in My House (London, 1956).
² Professor David Krause of Brown University, author of Sean O'Casey: The Man and His Work (New York, 1960). He has since published A Self-Portrait of the Artist as a Man: Sean O'Casey's Letters (Dublin, 1968), a preview and small sampling of the more than 6,000 pages of letters he had collected by then, and which he is currently preparing for a definitive three-volume edition.
³ This letter and the others quoted herein are now in the Colby College Library, published by the kind permission of Mrs. Sean O'Casey and David Krause.
is with his correspondent for the length of the letter, totally. He parts regretfully.

O’Casey doubtlessly wrote some letters with eventual publication in mind — what writer of reputation has not? On the whole, however, he was too richly sensible of a recipient’s integrity to impale him on the tip of a calculated “literary” massive; spontaneity is everywhere palpable. O’Casey’s extempore appraisal of his letters is distinctly overblown. Nonetheless, they leave as indelible an imprint of the man as do his finest dramatic works.

I

The first of these representative letters to be considered here was written to Eric Capon from Tingrith, O’Casey’s home in Totnes, Devon. Capon, who had recently published *Actors & Audiences in the Soviet Union*, was putting on the first performance of O’Casey’s *Purple Dust* with the Northern Company of Old Vic at the Liverpool Playhouse. This five-year-old play had been deferred from production in London, which had endured the Blitz and was in no mood to be gratuitously harassed by a lampoon of two blimpish Englishmen embroiled by Irish workmen. Although George Jean Nathan labeled the play “a first-rate comedy,” no producer in New York would venture to offend sympathetic audiences with anti-British propaganda in this distressful time. It is part of O’Casey’s disarming naiveté that he so patly rationalizes his “egoistic dictum,” here and elsewhere.

December 9, 1945

Dear Eric Capon: Thank you very much for your clear and eloquent report of *Purple Dust’s* production. And thank you for all your work in producing it. It is a hard job to produce a play of mine, after the strutting little things now seen half-dead on the stage. Next issue of *Common Wealth Review* is to have a short article by me on Theatre and Politicians. I hope *P. D.* may come to London. It may be easier there, for I see by an Irish paper that the actors, playwrights, and producers there are restless, many of them streaming over here to film and stage. Ria Mooney, who is to do *Red Roses for Me* is bringing over some with her; and it would, I think, be worth your while to keep an eye on them; though, I daresay, most of them will be after big salaries and big names and little plays.

4 During the War, the directors of the Liverpool Repertory Theatre suspended their programs. In 1942 they leased the house to the Old Vic until one year after cessation of hostilities. It became the first of several Old Vic provincial centers. Capon was one of the corps of producers.
P. D. is far better than R. Roses. This isn’t the egoistic dictum of O’Casey. G. J. Nathan first told me this, and he’s no bad judge. I believe him now, and have done so for some time; so that is why I’d like to have P. D. done in London — and, of course, everywhere else, too. The main thing in the play is good actors for O’Killigain, Avril, Souhaun, Stoke, Poges, and the principal workmen. Strange how Barney’s talk went so well — I always thought this the dullest part of the play. Actors, I agree, are so demoralised with scanty plays, that, when they find themselves in one with guts and gusto, they become lost souls. It was at once laughable and maddening while we were rehearsing The Silver Tassie. Indeed, that play has never yet been acted. It never will, I daresay. Such is our English stage.

Thanks again, and all good wishes to you, your wife, and little one.

Sean O’Casey

Ria Mooney, an Irish actress who also produced plays in Dublin, was appointed a producer at the Abbey Theatre with commission to encourage new playwrights with experimental tendencies. Against the advice of friends, she took the role of Rosie Redmond, the prostitute in The Plough and the Stars. Her major scene at the bar in Act II was one of the irritants to proper Irishmen which unleashed pandemonium on the fourth night of performance. She undauntedly went on to a plenary career, serving too as an officer in the Friends of the Irish Theatre. She introduced O’Casey’s Red Roses for Me at the Embassy Theatre on February 26, 1946. It was well received, critically and publicly.

George Jean Nathan (1882-1958), American literary and dramatic critic long associated with H. L. Mencken in editorship of the Smart Set and American Mercury, wrote favorably of O’Casey in his numerous books and press reviews. He claimed a “catholicity of taste that embraces Medea and the Follies,” and indeed became renowned for his perceptive enthusiasms and violent antipathies. An arbiter of the period, he laid down the following flats on O’Casey’s plays: of Juno and the Paycock,

5 “The Theatre and the Politician,” Common Wealth Review (January 1946); reprinted in Blasts and Benedictions, Articles and Stories by Sean O’Casey, Selected and Introduced by Ronald Avin (London, 1967), 28-29. Typical O’Caseyisms therein: 1) “Politicians keep away from the theatre, and the theatre is advised to keep away from politics”; 2) “Not only British politicians are indifferent; it is recorded that de Valera was once only in the Abbey Theatre; and then he went not to see a play, but to hear how a play sounded in Gaelic”; 3) “The nationalization of the theatre is as important as the nationalization of coal or transport”; 4) “Then there is the question of what is called propaganda in a play. There are very few plays in which the artist doesn’t give an opinion about life as he sees it.”

6 Purple Dust received its first London production at the Mermaid Theatre in 1962.
“one of the richest tragi-comedies,” and “I know nothing in drama and literature that comes anywhere near this play”; of Purple Dust, “a completely original” farce-comedy; of The End and the Beginning, “as hilarious a one-acter as our theatre has ever seen”; of The Plough and the Stars, “one of the finest dramas in the modern world theatre.” Once he demurred, more on ideological than esthetic grounds, that the Communist tilt in The Star Turns Red “has adversely affected Sean O’Casey as a dramatic artist.”

In 1928 The Silver Tassie consummated O’Casey’s tentative withdrawal from Ireland. As the ranking echelon of readers at the Abbey Theatre, W. B. Yeats, Lennox Robinson, and Lady Gregory rejected it, she reluctantly. A bitter donnybrook ensued, in which Yeats hurled the most provocative missiles. He denounced the play for containing “no dominating character or action,” for being “too abstract after the first act,” called the second act “an interesting technical experiment” but “too long for the material, and after that there is nothing.” How, he demanded, could O’Casey have written about the Great War when “you have never stood on its battlefields.” O’Casey erupted over this treatment of “the best work I have yet done,” and is said to have challenged Yeats to a duel. Yeats generously admitted that the Abbey Theatre might not now have been in existence except for the income from O’Casey’s plays, but the repudiation estranged O’Casey from the Abbey and made irrevocable his self-exile in England. The Silver Tassie was produced by C. B. Cochrane at the Apollo Theatre in London on October 11, 1929, with Charles Laughton and Barry Fitzgerald in the leading roles, but neither the widely publicized feud nor the all-star projection helped much. It ran only eight weeks and did not recover expenses.

O’Casey’s outlook on the state of Irish theatre was no less gloomy twenty years earlier. On March 20, 1926 he wrote to Huntley Carter: “I fear the Drama in Ireland is not in a very flourishing condition. No dramatist has sprung from the Revolutionary Movement — at least not yet. Macnamara, of course, preceded it. The modern trend of the European drama has

7 Fully detailed chapters are devoted to this controversy in Robert Hogan, The Experiments of Sean O’Casey (New York, 1960), 184-206; and Saros Cowasjee, Sean O’Casey: The Man Behind the Plays (Edinburgh, 1963), 102-136.
hardly reached us yet.” Brinsley Macnamara (1891-1963), nom de plume of John Weldon, was a novelist, dramatist, and drama critic with substantial following through the twenties and forties. He contributed a series of nine plays to the Abbey repertory — The Rebellion at Ballycullen (1919) to Marks and Mabel (1945). Appointed a Director of the Abbey Theatre in April 1935, he sided vehemently against The Silver Tassie when finally performed there in August of that year. In a long diatribe to the Irish Independent he flayed the play, the players, and the audience. He also resigned summarily. O’Casey may be a little off in his chronology. Macnamara did not predate the Revolutionary Movement; his first play in fact appeared only four years before O’Casey’s first. Macnamara had acted in many plays at the Abbey from 1910 on, which may account for the lapse. Macnamara later compiled Abbey Plays 1899-1948 (Dublin, 1949), a “dated list of all ‘first nights’ at the Abbey during the fifty years of its existence.”

II

O’Casey’s second correspondent, John Anthony O’Brien, is an American Roman Catholic priest who served as chaplain in the University of Illinois from 1917 to 1939, and from 1940 to date as research professor of theology in the University of Notre Dame at South Bend, Indiana. Author and editor of some thirty books, frequent contributor to popular magazines, scholarly journals, and newspaper syndicates, the Reverend O’Brien sent O’Casey a copy of his The Vanishing Irish: The Enigma of the Modern World (New York, 1953), a collection of nineteen essays written by himself, Paul Vincent Carroll, Shane Leslie, Sean O’Faolain, Kathleen Norris, Arland Ussher, and others. The governing theme is the decline of Ireland, presented in a tone of friendly castigation — to stem depletion and stimulate revival. After perusing and digesting, O’Casey responded with characteristic verve from Totnes in Devon. The letter is typed, except for the afterthought final paragraph which is in O’Casey’s hand.

On his only return trip to Ireland earlier in 1935, O’Casey visited Yeats, who was ill, and both put aside the old animosity. Yeats now dismissed his former objections to the play and permitted it to go on.
Dear Dr. O'Brien:

I delayed answering your kind letter for two reasons — because I wanted to get a decko at the book first; and because my wife slipped a week ago, fell, broke her right wrist badly, so that whereas before I had fifty things to do, now I have a hundred of them waiting for me everywhere.

Well, the book has come, and it will, indeed, be a joy to every soul hating Ireland, and to every mind who hopes that one day soon (sooner the better) the Irishman will be as rare on the shore of the Shannon as the Red Indian is rare on the shore of Manhattan. Funnily enough, the book will give joy to every heart and mind that has any affection left for Ireland because it is the loudest and clearest and wisest call ever given to my knowledge to Ireland to wake up, and lie dying and dreaming no more. Its great slogan is Muscail do mhisneach, a Banba! All the articles are, with one exception, fine ones, well written, cogent, sharp, and implicitly appealing for a change in the view towards life in Ireland, and wherever the Irish may be; that is the world over. The book should be read by every Irish soul, lay and clerical, for two generations backward, and unto the third and fourth generation forward; if the white candle before the holy rood (as Yeats pictured Kathleen ni Houlihan) is not to gutter out. I have been trying to say something similar myself for a long time now: but only get reprobation and malice for my pains. Indeed, COCKADOODLE DANDY is a secular hymn to life so despised and mocked at by the Irish Catholic, and, by your leave, by the Protestant, too. Whether the book will be effective in banishing the stupidity it aims at is another question. If it doesn’t, hardly anything will. I doubt it myself; but I do hope most fervently that it may.

I know many instances of this deadly love of sterility among the Irish. A farming family, ten miles from Athlone, had two daughters and three sons. The farm was one of 40 acres or so. The eldest son when a young man left the farm, became an accountant by self-education, and, afterwards became the father of my wife. The youngest son by marriage got a smaller farm, and had two sons; the other son with the two girls worked the original farm. He toiled for years just making ends meet, unable, so he said, to improve the farm in any way. He died suddenly, and it was found that he had left no will; and discovered, too, that he had near 4000 pounds in the bank. Banked secretly, without a soul knowing, till it came out after his death. Now, as the daughter of the eldest son, Mrs O’Casey was entitled to almost all the money, including the farm when it was sold. She got a letter from an Athlone Solicitor telling her all this, and asking her to make a legal declaration renouncing her claim. The two daughters were then old women, one well over eighty, unmarried, of course, though the younger one, Kate, was considered a beauty in her day, and from the look of her (we went to see them when on a visit to Eire in 1935), she was certainly that in her young days. She was now well over eighty, and her sister but a few years behind; but they both still worked in the house and on the farm. The two boys of the brother working the other farm were grand handsome lads. One has since left for the world outside, and the other stayed on the land. We haven’t heard for some years now about them. But afterwards, a few years or so, along comes another letter from the

9 Gaelic for “Take courage, 0 Ireland!”
Solicitor asking Mrs. O'C. to renounce all claim to the farm again, and
to add that to her well-known knowledge the Farm was to go to the sur-
viving brother (him with the two sons) when the old ladies died. It
appeared that they had gone leaving no will behind them either. Mrs
O'C. did what was asked of her, and I hope the young lad left on the
land has married and has children; for if not, there's no scion of the
family left there to keep the name going in the part of Westmeath. What
lonely places are all the places where the river Shannon flows! And
Wicklow! We went all over it with Barry Fitzgerald, and found it popu-
lated with sheep, but hardly a child to be seen: not one in fact did we
see wherever we went: Loneliness everywhere. At Roundwood we saw a
lonely priest standing in the road talking to a bus-driver about to con-
tinue his journey. We had expected to get lunch there, but the one little
hotel had been burned down, and there the four walls stood bleak and
dead. Father Lavelle asked us to his place, but we decided to go on to
Glendalough, with Father Lavelle delighted to go with us, and to be
able to deliver himself from the loneliness for an hour or so. Oh, I
hate to think of it.

The one false note in the book, in my opinion, is the article by P. V.
Carroll, with his 'mystical Irish soul!' And his pampered American
women, unaware of the millions of Amer. women who have to work as
hard and as diligently as women everywhere else.

All the reasons given in the Book are sensible ones, and are all writ-
ten lively; but, in my opinion again, the cause goes deeper; it goes down
to the Faith Itself, the Renunciation of the world, the flesh, and the devil.
The Devil we know now isn't such a bad lad, and, at worst, is but an
illusion; and the world and the flesh are beautiful things, fashioned by
God himself; so it seems to be a curious thing to renounce the works of
His Hand.

This is all written in a hurry, for I've many things to do — just going
now to help Eileen (Mrs. O'C.) with the supper. Curiously, I have been
working on a play for some months which touches upon the question in
front of us — THE BISHOP'S BONFIRE.

Well, God speed the Book of yours into every Irish hand. The Irish
have out-lawed the lover and his lass; may the Book bring them back
into the glory and vivacity of our Irish life. Amen.

With thanks for your kind letter, and many, many warm and good
wishes to you.

It is grand to have the Protestant and clever Arland Usher, standing
with the Catholic and clever Sean O'Faolain on this question of our
survival. The death of the Irish would be the death of many grand things.

Sean O'Casey

Mrs. O'Casey was Eileen Reynolds Carey, an Irish actress
active in London during the twenties. When the girl who was
rehearsing the part of Nora in The Plough and the Stars became
ill several days before the first performance in 1927, Miss Carey
was summoned to the office of New Theatre to talk over ar-
rangements for filling the vacancy. Here O'Casey first laid eyes
on her and was enchanted. She qualified for the role, played it
successfully through the run. Later that year she married the
O'Casey was inordinately attached to *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy*, naming it at different times "my favorite play" and "the best-written play of mine." He saw The Cock, chief symbol of this affirmative satire, "the joyful active spirit of life as it weaves a way through the Irish scene." He assailed the power of the Church-State to inhibit the individual in pursuit of self-realization. So, in more than one area, his objective paralleled that of O'Brien's anthology — to bestir the Irish from their slough of apathy. His hope against hope that the play might eventually influence the situation was not to materialize. *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy* was first performed by amateurs at the People's Theatre in Newcastle-on-Tyne in December 1949, produced off-Broadway in November 1958, at the Edinburgh International Festival in 1959, and not in London until later the same year. Another of O'Casey's anguished apologues to his countrymen went virtually unheard in his homeland.

The Irish localities O'Casey mentions are in the easternmost central counties on the Irish Sea, a region famed for its scenic beauty and historic ruins.

Barry Fitzgerald, stage name for Dublin-born William Joseph Shields (1888-1961), was for twenty years a British civil servant by day and Abbey actor by night. He took to the profession full time, rose to stardom in Hollywood and Broadway. He played three premier roles in the O'Casey canon: Captain Boyle in *Juno and the Paycock*, Fluther Good in *The Plough and the Stars*, and Sylvester Heegan in *The Silver Tassie*. At the height of the rioting at *The Plough and the Stars*, he forthwith knocked a protestor from the footlights to the orchestra pit with a right to the jaw. He was described in his day as "the most versatile character actor in the world."

Paul Vincent Carroll is best known for *Shadow and Substance*, which won the Drama Critics' Circle Award in New York City for best foreign play of 1938; he also won the Abbey Theatre prize for best play of the year with *Things That Are Caesar's* in 1932. The Abbey Directors rejected his *The White Steed*, while George Jean Nathan hailed it as best play of its season on Broadway. Carroll's contribution to O'Brien's book is "The Mystical Irish."

*The Bishop's Bonfire* was O'Casey's first play after *The Plough and the Stars* to have its original production in Ireland, directed by Tyrone Guthrie at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin on
February 28, 1955. Thematically it is not far from *Cock-a-Doodle Dandy*, their difference consisting in the tone of comedy as opposed to the tone of tragedy. O'Casey denoted *The Bishop's Bonfire* "a play about the ferocious chastity of the Irish, a lament for the condition of Ireland." Again he lambasted the arrogant clergy for repressing the natural instincts of Irish youth. There was some hissing and booing at the Gaiety this time, but no rioting.

Arland Ussher is a philosopher, Gaelic scholar, and art critic. He has published a two-volume work on existentialism, another duple set of Gaelic phrases and aphorisms, translations, and two noteworthy studies of Irish culture and literature: *The Face and Mind of Ireland* (1950), and *Three Great Irishmen* (1952), which treats of Shaw, Yeats, and Joyce. His essay in O'Brien's collection is "The Boundary between the Sexes," one of O'Casey's particular bugbears.

Sean O'Faolain writes in sundry veins — biography, the novel, short story, and critique — all cordially received on both sides of the Atlantic. He has taught at Harvard and lectured extensively through the United States. His "Love among the Irish" is ninth in O'Brien's compilation. Poles apart from O'Casey in education and worldliness, O'Faolain nevertheless saw eye to eye with him on most problems affecting the complexion and evolution of the Irish spirit. In *The Commonweal* of October 11, 1935 he deplored O'Casey's flight from Ireland as "an error, not of the judgement but the emotions," voicing the regret of many when he declared that "never was exile more foolishly and unprofitably self-imposed than by this man who mistook two theatre directors for a whole people, and thereby deprived himself of an inspiration, of an audience, and of a home."

True, to a point. For those who have come to know O'Casey through his plays, his memoirs, and his letters will count it good fortune that like Joyce he was Irish of the Irish, and no measure of distance between himself and his native soil could ever cancel that. O'Casey, up to his psychic eyebrows in Irishness, never really left the ould sod. And for that circumstance the annals of Irish literature yield auxiliary riches from the laughter and keening, the swagger, the whimsy and the hardy irreverence he implanted there.

In *Sunset and Evening Star* (London, 1954), he said of himself: "O'Casey could no more help being an Irishman than Moses could help being a Jew" (p. 130).