

# SAM THOMPSON, STEWART PARKER, AND THE LINEAGE OF NORTHERN IRISH DRAMA

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## **Abstract:**

Northern Irish dramatist Stewart Parker (1941-1988) wrote plays typically valued for their wit, intellectual content, and formal experimentation. Nonetheless, he was profoundly influenced as a young man by a very different sort of playwright. Sam Thompson (1916-1965), who began his working life in the Belfast shipyards, squarely confronted Northern Irish sectarianism in his plays. His sense of the political potential of drama left an enduring mark on Parker, who organized and edited Thompson's manuscripts several years after his untimely death. Although their dramatic writings bear little resemblance to each other, the two writers should be regarded as united in a common Northern Irish dramatic tradition by virtue of their shared socialist outlook, belief in the importance of individual stands against conformity, and sense of theatre's social mission.

**Keywords:** Stewart Parker, Sam Thompson, Northern Irish drama, Northern Irish literature, Belfast writers

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Ilha do Desterro	Florianópolis	nº 58	p. 179-189	jan/jun. 2010
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Nonetheless, he was profoundly influenced as a young man by a very different sort of playwright. Sam Thompson squarely confronted Northern Irish sectarianism in his plays, and his sense of the political purpose and potential of drama left an enduring mark on Parker. The younger man organized and edited Thompson's manuscripts several years after his untimely death and became an outspoken advocate of his work. Although their dramatic writings bear little resemblance to each other, the two men should be regarded as united in a common Northern Irish dramatic tradition by virtue of their shared socialist outlook, belief in the importance of individual stands against conformity, and sense of theatre's social mission. Thompson's life and work, with which Parker became intimately acquainted early in his own career, demonstrated to Parker how he could realize his long-cherished dream of being a writer while remaining faithful to his origins.

Born in 1941, Parker grew up in a working-class family in East Belfast but benefitted from the 1947 Education Act, which enabled him to attend grammar school and university at the expense of the state. This education simultaneously separated him from his roots and gave him the tools to analyze the assumptions of his childhood. The image of no man's land recurs in Parker's writing and speaking about Northern Ireland, and it epitomizes how he saw himself in relation to his native place. He belonged to the North, he readily admitted, yet the very nature of his belonging ensured that, emotionally, he would always be an outsider. No man's land was his own precarious "home": unclaimed ground between two warring sides, riddled with ambiguity. This elusive middle ground was a place of possibility and uncertainty that he embraced by temperament, but he would insist in 1987 that his affinity with it also stemmed from his upbringing:

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.

Although the crisis of identity experienced by working class Protestants in Northern Ireland frequently manifested itself in "destructive" ways, Parker maintained that it could be remarkably fruitful for a writer, since "You've got a hell of a lot to explore" (qtd. in Purcell).

When Parker began trying to support himself with his pen in the early 1970s, however, there were few writers from his background to whom he could look as models. The most notable exception was Thompson, whose socialist convictions and willingness to confront the sectarianism that he saw as Ireland's greatest problem Parker memorably described in 1970:

In Northern Ireland we have neither religion nor politics, but only a kind of fog of religi-otics which seeps in everywhere. To be a writer is to be a public figure, up there in the trenches with the captains and the clergymen. Sam Thompson fully accepted this and he roamed about fearlessly in no-man's-land waving a red flag [...] ("Introduction" 12).

Thompson was born in Belfast in 1916, the seventh of eight children of a lamplighter, and lived through the Troubles of 1920-22 (during which he saw a Catholic man kicked to death and Catholic neighbours driven from their homes) and those of 1935. At the age of fourteen he entered the shipyards like four brothers before him, working as a painter and involving himself in the National Society of Painters. Thompson worked in Manchester during World War II, then; after a failed attempt to go into business for himself, got a job as a painter for the Belfast Corporation and served as a shop steward in his union. He became a

writer by chance at the age of thirty-nine. He frequented the Elbow Room, a pub near the BBC, and here talks producer and author Sam Hanna Bell overheard Thompson telling stories about life in the shipyards and encouraged him to write them down. Thompson helped with a radio feature about the yard and then wrote half a dozen radio pieces of his own with titles like "Brush in Hand" and "The Foreman" (Parker, "Introduction" 7-10; Devlin 4-5; Garrett, "Artist"; May Thompson).

Thompson made Irish theatre history with his first full-length play, *Over the Bridge*, written between 1955 and 1957 and based on actual events that Thompson remembered from the shipyard (Parker, "Introduction" 10; May Thompson).<sup>1</sup> It depicts a trade union weakened by personal ambition, self-interest, lack of faith in union values, evangelical religion, and, above all, sectarianism. Peter O'Boyle, a Catholic worker elected to the district committee of the union, attracts the jealousy of a Protestant co-worker, who starts to spread rumours about O'Boyle's supposedly republican politics. When an unexplained explosion occurs in the shipyard, many of the men jump to the conclusion that it has been caused by an IRA bomb, and all Catholic workers are suddenly in danger from a spontaneously formed Protestant mob. Most of them stay home from work the next day, but O'Boyle insists that he will not be driven from his employment. A principled union leader, Davy Mitchell, supports his stand, and the mob brutally attacks them both, killing the Protestant Mitchell. The play's message, in Parker's words, is straightforward: "there were sectarian pogroms in the shipyard in 1920-22 and in 1935; all their elements are thriving still; here's how it could happen again" ("Introduction" 12). Paddy Devlin, a prominent Catholic and socialist politician and friend of Thompson, remarks that *Over the Bridge* "for the first time in Ulster drama placed sectarianism, the mob and the pogrom centre stage" (Devlin 5).

The controversy surrounding the original production of the play proved similarly decisive for Northern Irish drama. Thompson had offered the script to James Ellis, the new director of productions of the

Ulster Group Theatre, who accepted it despite Thompson's prediction that he "would not touch [it] with a barge-pole" (Byrne 47; Mengel 80). Rehearsals for *Over the Bridge* had already begun when Ritchie McKee, the chairman of the Group's board of directors, read it, decided it was inflammatory, and persuaded a majority of the board that it should be withdrawn (Devlin 5-6). In what Parker termed a "staggering repudiation of drama as a serious art form," the board proclaimed its determination "not to mount any play which would offend or affront the religious or political beliefs or sensibilities of the man in the street of any denomination or class in the community and which would give rise to sectarian or political controversy of an extreme nature" (Parker, "Introduction" 11). McKee, in addition to his chairmanship of the Group's board, was the national governor of BBC Northern Ireland, vice-president of the Stormont-sponsored Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts, and a well-known Unionist, thus "his suppression of the Group Theatre production was regarded by many as badly disguised state censorship" (Pilkington 81, 76).<sup>2</sup> The scandal over the board's action raged for over six months and resulted directly or indirectly in the resignation of half of the board and all of the acting members of the company, marking the end of the old Group Theatre (Byrne 48). Meanwhile, Ellis and Thompson formed an independent production company, Ulster Bridge Productions Ltd., and arranged to stage the play at the Empire Theatre, a venue owned by a Dublin family and associated with light entertainment. *Over the Bridge* opened on 26 January 1960 with many former Group actors and played to full houses for six weeks, attracting a total of 42,000 people—many of them shipyard workers who might never before have attended a play but who knew, as Parker put it, "the reality of [Thompson's] fictions" (Devlin 6; Pilkington 77; Mengel 80; Parker, "Introduction" 11-12, 7).

Those who attended this production of the play included Stewart Parker, then in his first year at Queen's University, and his uncle Edwin Jobes, a shipwright (Jobes). Never before, Parker remarked later, had

he seen working-class people realistically portrayed on stage, and he experienced the shock of "recognition" (Warren Thompson). Parker recalled the occasion in a piece about Thompson for the *Irish Times*:

It would be hard to say which of us was the more shattered by it. We were like members of a lost tribe, thrust before a mirror for the first time, scared and yet delighted by our images, sensing even then that they were much more than a mere reflection. And the mirror was no missionary trinket, but the work of a dues-paying member of the tribe, a man with the plain prod name of Sam Thompson ("The Tribe and Thompson").

*Over the Bridge* provided no easy answers to the questions it raised, but rather threw them back at the audience in its final scene. Warren Baxter, a young shop steward who had previously been prepared to exploit sectarian feelings for his own advantage, delivers the last, stricken speech of the play:

I've asked myself what unions would be like if there wasn't men in them like Davy, and I've wondered what sort of Christians they were who would form a mob and maim a man and murder another in the sacred name of religion. [He pauses.] A man told me yesterday that when that mob went into action he walked away, and so did hundreds of his so-called respectable workmates because they said it was none of their business. None of their business [...] that's what they said. Then they walked away, and that's what frightens me, [he sobs quietly] they walked away! (Sam Thompson 119)

Thompson's challenge to his peers is unmistakable, and surely it is not fanciful to suggest, as Parker did in 1970, that "his work contributed to that extraordinary mass meeting in the shipyard of 15 August 1969, at which the 8,000 workers, brought together by their shop stewards in

the midst of renewed civil anarchy and bloodshed, voted in favour of maintaining 'peace and goodwill in the yard and throughout the province'" ("Introduction" 14-15). Indeed, Sandy Scott, the shop steward chiefly responsible for that meeting, spoke approvingly of *Over the Bridge* (Rosenfield).

Thompson went on to write two more stage plays, *The Evangelist* (1963) and the experimental and never-produced *The Masquerade*, which attempted an exploration of fascism. The BBC broadcast his television play, *Cemented with Love*, in April 1965. But Thompson himself had died two months earlier of heart disease and overwork in the offices of the Northern Ireland Labour Party, for which he had waged, in 1964, a quixotic campaign to be elected MP for the rural district of South Down (Parker, "Introduction" 13-14; Mengel 81). He had lived to be only forty-nine, yet in his three produced plays, Parker argued, he had conveyed "his complete diagnosis of Ulster's disease":

*Over the Bridge* shows sectarianism worming its way through people's working lives, *The Evangelist* uncovers the fanaticism and hypocrisy deforming their religion, and *Cemented with Love* the appalling corruption of their traditional political parties, Unionist and Nationalist.

Despite the impressive amount that Thompson had managed to accomplish in his short writing career, Parker felt his untimely death as "a grievous loss to Irish drama" and to Northern Ireland: "He has never been needed more than in the dark days since his death. The painful missing factor in the whole Ulster equation is a sane and compassionate leader for the Protestant working class. There is no knowing how Sam Thompson would have fared in this perhaps impossible position, but he remains the nearest thing to such a man that we have yet seen" ("Introduction" 14).

By the time Parker wrote these words he had become a semi-official advocate for Thompson in addition to an admirer of his work. In

October 1969, he had been approached by Brian Garrett, an acquaintance from Queen's who was now a solicitor, a Northern Ireland Labour Party activist, and Thompson's literary executor (Fannin; Garrett). Garrett sought someone to organize Thompson's papers, which had been left in a disastrous state at his sudden death. Thompson, not a methodical man, had tossed handwritten scraps, pages of typescript, letters, press clippings, and other memorabilia into two large tea chests. Not even complete manuscripts were collated; his son Warren remembers that it looked as if Thompson had written pieces and then thrown them up in the air to shuffle them. In some cases, he had not possessed an intact copy of a produced script, and actors had to be tracked down in the hope that they had kept one. These difficulties were compounded by Thompson's nearly illegible handwriting (Garrett; May Thompson; Warren Thompson). Putting all this in order would be no small task, but Garrett wanted to ensure that Thompson's work would be available in the future. Parker seemed to him a likely man for the job. Garrett reasoned that the project would be a way for him to earn a bit of money and feel his way back into Belfast, and he suspected (correctly) that Parker would feel some affinity with Thompson. Parker, for his part, was grateful for the opportunity to help preserve Thompson's legacy (Garrett).

The "Sam Thompson Project," as Parker called it, evolved in a number of different directions over a period of about three years. One important product of it was the December 1970 publication of *Over the Bridge* in book form by the Dublin imprint Gill and Macmillan, with what publisher Michael Gill called a "superb and exciting" introduction by Parker. Parker had originally wanted all three of Thompson's produced plays published in one volume, but he could not convince Gill that this would be a commercial proposition (Rosenfield; Parker, journal). He attempted to tackle the issue of script availability in phase two of the project, the preparation of the Sam Thompson archive for the Belfast Central Library, which had bought Thompson's papers at Garrett's instigation (Garrett; Quidnunc). In a grant application to the

Arts Council of Northern Ireland, Parker explained that one of his responsibilities, in addition to cataloguing Thompson's radio scripts, correspondence, notes, and manuscripts, would be to edit Thompson's remaining plays in order to provide clean acting scripts to drama groups that might be interested in performing them. He calculated that he had spent about eighty hours preparing *Over the Bridge* for the press from the prompt copy used in the original production and estimated that he would spend a similar amount of time on both *The Evangelist* and *The Masquerade* (Parker, letter to Jamison).<sup>3</sup> Parker earned small sums from the Arts Council, Gill and Macmillan, and the Belfast Corporation, but for the most part his work on the project represented, as he told Thompson's widow, "a labour of love" (May Thompson).

Though Parker's later work for the stage does not resemble Thompson's in any obvious way, his predecessor remained an enduring influence on him. Thompson's independence of mind, outspokenness, vision, and fidelity to his roots all resonated with Parker, who articulated his view of the older man's importance to the "tribe" of working-class Northern Irish Protestants:

Paisley is the cry of its blood and of the dark side of its mind, where race memories snout blindly around and psychic wounds cry like a child for succour. But Sam Thompson was the voice of the tribes [sic] heart and its head, the voice of all that is civilised and decent in Belfast working-class life, the embodiment of its impassioned commonsense and derisive good nature [...]. All through his work flows a swift deep current of love for his people and a conviction of their giant potential, thwarted though it has been down the years ("The Tribe and Thompson").

Thompson, Parker wrote, "saw right from the start that poverty and sectarian violence were root and branch of the one ugly tree," and in embodying that insight his work eerily predicted the resurgence of

the Troubles while laying the foundation for a serious, engaged Northern Irish drama ("Introduction" 9). Thompson's sense of the urgent political potential of theatre most inspired Parker, who argued in 1970 that plays like *Over the Bridge* "do not 'express' despair or hatred, they involve you in attitudes to those emotions. They conquer by defining them." In the middle of a situation such as the Troubles, "The 'real thing' (and the newsreels of it) is chaotic flux, overwhelmingly meaningless. Drama rescues us from the chaos by giving it a shape and a pattern, affording us insights and a saving chance to contemplate them" ("The Tribe and Thompson"). The most social of art forms, Parker realized, also served a vital social purpose.<sup>4</sup>

## Notes

1. Thompson's widow recalls that Sam based Peter O'Boyle in the play on a Catholic worker he himself had helped to escape from a mob. He modeled Davy Mitchell on a shop steward beaten to death for standing up for trade union principles and refusing to work unless the Catholic were allowed to return.
2. Pilkington, in his thoroughly researched and well-written article, comes to the iconoclastic conclusion that the action of the play actually had the "hegemonic" effect of reinforcing Unionist beliefs. In my opinion he greatly underestimates the subversive power of *Over the Bridge* in 1960.
3. *Cemented with Love* had been adapted for the stage by Tomás MacAnna, so a good acting version of it already existed.
4. Tom McLaughlin, who saw Parker often at this time, remembers his interest in the interplay between drama and social dynamics. Parker, he says, was taken by the idea that drama could make a difference, as he felt *Over the Bridge* had done.

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