



## *The Plough and the Stars*

# Sixteen characters in search of analysis

Joe Conroy

History, as both Karl Marx and Abba have observed, has a habit of repeating itself, but we have been reminded recently that it rarely repeats itself exactly. In 1926 Seán O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* opened in the Abbey Theatre to critical acclaim and box-office success; recently it was revived in the Abbey to similar acclaim and success. In 1926 a fierce debate raged over the play's political content; of late, however, such debate is conspicuous mainly by its absence. It seems to be the fate of plays which have attained classic status that, as time goes on and more attention is focussed on the technique of their production, what exactly is being produced gets forgotten.

But *The Plough and the Stars* cries out for political analysis. It remains the best-known play about the Irish working class; the best-known play about the historical turning point of Easter 1916; and the best-known play – in Ireland, at any rate – about the ideas that motivate people to rebel or not to rebel. Its author was an openly declared socialist. All this, and it is a work that has never lost its established place in the pantheon of the Irish theatre.

Of course, it is a work of art, and needs to be considered artistically. But you wouldn't be long doing so before breaking beyond the bounds of aesthetics as such, and leaping right into the heart of the play's politics. To ignore or dismiss this by retreating behind the walls of dramatic licence – something O'Casey himself tried when first criticised – won't do. *The Plough and the Stars* is a political play by a political playwright looking to convey a political message. That message has to be defined and questioned.

The cast of characters is headed by Jack Clitheroe, who is just after leaving the Irish Citizen Army because he wasn't made an officer, and because his wife Nora was always at him to jack it in. Just as the couple settle down to domestic bliss Jack learns that he has been appointed a commandant after all, only Nora hid the news from him; he goes off to lead a Citizen Army mobilisation. Later, during the Easter rising, Nora begs him to abandon it; he refuses and is killed in the fighting, while she suffers a miscarriage and a nervous breakdown.

A dramatist is under no obligation whatsoever to stick to the historical facts. But it is fair to ask what kind of an adaptation O'Casey makes of them. He has Clitheroe being appointed commandant by General Jim Connolly, and charged with mobilising the eighth battalion, ICA, with two days' rations and fifty rounds of ammunition, the order being despatched by Captain Brennan, a butcher. Now, Connolly was never called General: his rank was commandant, one of only two in the Citizen Army. The Army could never dream of having eight battalions, or that amount of supplies for them. And a tradesman was unlikely to be in the Citizen Army at all, let alone a captain in it.

The difference between the actual Citizen Army and O'Casey's stage Citizen Army is obvious. He presents it as a full-scale ornamental outfit with tinpot generals and all the tinsel that go with them – the kind of place where merchants and the vainglorious could count on ascending the ranks. These are the people he presents as giving their lives in Easter week: conceited men motivated by self-importance.

Conceited men held back by selfish women, to be exact. Nora Clitheroe has, in the words of a neighbour, "notions of upperosity", considering herself a cut above the rest of the tenement. During the rising, as Jack tries to get a dying comrade to a doctor, Nora appeals to him to come back to her and let the man die. As far as O'Casey is concerned, this is how

women are. "Nora voices not only the feeling of Ireland's women, but the women of the human race", he wrote in defence of his play. "The safety of her brood is the true morality of every woman."

Were there no vain men in the Citizen Army in 1916? Were there no selfish women trying to keep them out of it all? Chances are there were. But the overwhelming majority of the Citizen Army fought out of a determination to end British rule in Ireland and win a better life for their class, wanting nothing in return. The overwhelming majority of their wives, girlfriends and mothers supported the actions of their "brood", and not a few shouldered a rifle themselves. O'Casey had every right to ignore them and instead construct a story of a vain husband and his selfish wife. But equally, we have every right to ask why, and to answer: because he wanted to belittle the Easter rising and those who fought in it.

O'Casey himself took the view expressed in the play by the Covey, that "There's only one war worth havin': th' war for th' economic emancipation of th' proletariat." He never appreciated that the proletariat can only win that war if it also fights battles against every kind of oppression, national, sexual or whatever—above all, that the Irish working class cannot liberate itself without overthrowing British rule. The Citizen Army did appreciate this, however imperfectly, and this is the fundamental reason that O'Casey holds them up as objects of ridicule.

The exact nature of the ridicule owes something to O'Casey's personal predicament. His disdain for the Easter rising was retrospective: in the years immediately following it, he was part of the mood of romantic nationalist eulogy of 'the men of 1916'. His refusal to join in the rising itself was partly down to quarrels he had had with its leaders, and partly because his elderly mother (to whom he dedicated *The Plough and the Stars*) was dependent on him. Just as his own decision was a matter of personal pride, so is Jack Clitheroe's; just as his own involvement could have meant family tragedy, so does Jack Clitheroe's.

O'Casey spent Easter week watching and admiring those who seized the opportunity to loot Dublin's shops. Perhaps that is why *The Plough and the Stars*'s portrayal of the looters rings truer than its portrayal of the insurgents, people with whom O'Casey had severed his connections. But the heroic admiration it bestows upon the looters, and denies to the rebels, is misplaced. Which is more heroic, and which is better: stealing a bag of flour, or trying to overthrow an empire?

Certainly flour larceny is less problematic to the powers that be, and the latest powers that were certainly appreciated O'Casey's Dublin plays. *The Shadow of a Gunman* presented an egotistical man who pretended republicanism in order to win notoriety, resulting in the death of an innocent girl. *Juno and the Paycock* presented a world in a terrible state of chassis because politics has turned hearts of flesh into hearts of stone. The ruling classes of the young Free State lapped it up: they flocked into the Abbey, saving it from bankruptcy, and the government decided that the theatre now deserved a state subsidy. *The Plough and the Stars* spun the same line: all that nonsense between 1916 and 1923 was desperate altogether, and wasn't it time now to put it all behind us?

Which is not to say that the play's artistic merits didn't come into it. Where the play attempts to provide a straightforward entertaining night out, it succeeds. The comic wisdom of Fluther, and the Covey's thwarting of his Uncle Peter are great crack. The way Bessie Burgess turns out to be good-natured towards Nora in the end, only to turn on her in death before proclaiming her faith in Jesus, is superb (even if the way she meets her death does lay it on a bit thick).

The great political strength of the play is that it portrays the looters of Easter week. Here it puts its finger on one of the big ambiguities of 1916, that a large part of Dublin's working class didn't support the rising, and if anything frustrated it. O'Casey's portrayal fumbles the opportunity, however, in its haste to glamorise the looters so as to deprecate the insurgents. Only at the end, when Fluther's sympathy towards the rebels captures something of the

move from contempt to sympathy for the rising, does the play look like getting the point.

But O'Casey went the other way, from sympathy to contempt, and so this is not the only time he gives the wrong answer to the right question. There *is* a huge tension in the way the working class came out of 1916 as just a tail of the nationalist movement. There *is* a huge tension between political commitment to revolution and personal commitment to loved ones. There *is* a huge tension between the use of revolutionary violence and its tragic consequences. O'Casey raises these questions, but comes nowhere near to answering them. Perhaps, when the head has finally gone flat on *The Plough and the Stars*, someone might write a play that does.

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