

Davies, Stan Gébler

by Pauric J. Dempsey and Bridget Hourican

Davies, Stan Gébler (1943–94), journalist, was born 16 July 1943 in Wales, son of Max Davies, furniture manufacturer, and his wife Olive, sister of the writer Ernest Gébler (1915–98). His protestant father was apparently of Russian Jewish origin, and his maternal grandfather, Adolf Gébler, was a Jewish Czech musician, who chose to live in Dublin after falling in love with an Irish cinema usherette in 1910; he later joined the Radio Éireann Orchestra as a clarinettist. Stan was baptised in the catholic church in Dún Laoghaire, Co. Dublin. His mixed heritage led to his being bullied in his schooldays by catholics for being a protestant, by protestants for being a catholic, and by both for being a Jew. In adulthood he tried to honour all three heritages, but eventually settled on catholicism. He was educated in Dublin and later Canada, where the family emigrated in the 1950s. Originally intent on becoming a musician, like his grandfather, he then determined on becoming a writer and in 1964 moved to London, where he lived briefly with his uncle Ernest in Cannon Hill. Taking up journalism, he worked on a number of Fleet Street publications – including the *Evening Standard* – as a feature and opinion writer and literary and drama critic, and developed a robust, amusing, colloquial style. The content of his columns was often risqué – a hard drinker and dedicated womaniser described as ‘a breed that one no longer encounters, a rake-hell, rambunctious, very Irish journalist on the anarchist right’ (*Irish Independent*, 24 June 1994), he was a denizen of London’s raffish and bohemian pubs, and spiced up his writing with accounts of his drinking sessions with writers and artists. His style was racy and readable but he was less than meticulous in fact-checking, and the *Evening Standard’s* legendarily stringent editor, Charles Wintour, complained to an assistant editor in 1971 that Davies was careless and unreliable (because he had confused *Time* magazine with *Life*), and recommended suspending him for a month. Scarcity of work on Fleet Street may have been a factor in Davies’s decision to settle permanently in Ireland in the 1980s, but he was also motivated by patriotism, although he was seldom in Ireland while growing up and his accent remained ‘received Irish over a Canadian core’ (Carlo Gébler, 4).

As well as several thrillers, Davies published *James Joyce: a portrait of the artist* (1975), his most serious and durable work. Davies emphasised those traits in Joyce that resembled his own – hard drinking, sexual prurience, and bohemianism – but he was a sincere admirer and astute reader of the works, except *Finnegans wake*, which he dismissed as the apotheosis of the crossword puzzle. Although Davies added little new to Joyce scholarship, his is a readable, energetic account.

Purportedly to escape the attentions of the British inland revenue, Davies moved to west Cork in the mid 1980s and lived in Kinsale, Castletownshend, and later Union Hall, from where he chronicled life in rural Ireland. In February 1987 he stood for election to the dáil as unionist candidate for Cork South-West. His previous foray into

politics had been as press attaché to the publisher John Calder, when he stood as liberal candidate for central Scotland in 1979. Some thought Davies merely flirtatious in his politics. Referring to his legendary contrariness, an obituarist opined that he had ‘the soul of an Irish whig – in another age he would probably have espoused a nationalist cause, but in a conventionally nationalist PC era, he went the other way’ (*Irish Independent*, 24 June 1994). Advocating reunion with the UK, Davies dismissed Ulster unionists as Orange nationalists, and blamed Englishmen for thinking unionism was a club for anglophiles; he believed Irish, English, Scots, and Welsh should be proud of belonging to an equal family of nations. His campaign rosette bore the slogan ‘Vote for me or I’ll kiss your baby’; he garnered 134 votes and a fillip for his column.

His carousing lifestyle caught up with him in February 1988 when he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He wrote an article in the *Evening Standard*, entitled ‘It’s so hard to tell your friends you’re dying’, and – prior to his operation – held a last supper for close friends. He had by this stage become a devout catholic and felt spiritually prepared for death, but the operation was successful and he lived another six years. From September 1988 until his death, he wrote a fortnightly diary for the *Sunday Independent*, entitled ‘The good life’. It was jaunty, erudite and gossipy; he knew everyone and was mostly well liked, but some kept their distance since he could be cantankerous, a bad drunk, and vitriolic – his published pieces on Edna O’Brien alienated her son, his nephew Carlo Gébler. Returning to live in Dublin from Cork, Davies was a well-known figure at Dublin events. After celebrating Bloomsday (16 June) in usual style, he died a week later, unexpectedly of a heart attack, at home in Dalkey, on 23 June 1994. He was survived by his wife, Jan Collis (m. 1966, subsequently separated) and by their daughter.

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*Times Literary Supplement*, 12 Dec. 1975; *Independent* (London), *Daily Telegraph*, *Ir. Times*, 24 June 1994; *Ir. Independent*, 25 June 1994, *Sunday Independent*, 26 June, 24 July 1994, 25 June 1995; Carlo Gébler, *Father and I: a memoir* (2000)