

O'Casey, Sean

by Robert G. Lowery

O'Casey, Sean (1880–1964), writer, was born 30 March 1880 at 85 Upper Dorset St., Dublin, to Michael Casey (c.1837–1886), a clerk in the Irish Church mission, and Susan Casey (c.1835–1918), who were married on 27 January 1863 at St Catherine's church, Thomas St., Dublin. He was baptised John Casey on 28 July 1880 at St Mary's church (Church of Ireland). His surviving siblings included brothers Isaac Archer Casey (1873–1931), Michael Harding Casey (1865–1947), and Tom Casey (1869–1914); and sister Isabella Charlotte Casey (1865–1918).

Early life O'Casey was a sickly child, suffering from painful ulcerated corneas, due to unsanitary living conditions. When his father died aged 49, the family's welfare markedly declined. They moved from Upper Dorset St. to 9 Innisfallen Parade (c.1882), 20 Lower Dominick St. (c.1888), 20 Hawthorn Terrace (1889), and 18 Abercorn Road, where O'Casey's mother died (9 November 1918). He was a member of the St Barnabas Church, Upper Sheriff St., North Wall, which he later referred to as one of the 'four symbols of his life' (with the Abbey Theatre, his home, and Liberty Hall). The church supported a national school, which he attended (1890–94), and where he taught Sunday school (1900–03).

Because of his eye illness, O'Casey attended school sporadically, learning to read later than his peers. But his early reading included the Bible; classics such as Shakespeare and other Elizabethan dramatists and writers; and Victorian, progressive, and socialist writers, including Tennyson, Ruskin, Shelley, and, later, George Bernard Shaw (qv). In 1887 he was awarded a second-class prize for oral proficiency in Holy Scripture and church formularies at St Mary's Sunday school.

O'Casey started work at about age 14 as a stock boy at Leedom-Hampton wholesale chandlers, Henry St., Dublin (c.1894–5). The following year, he worked for a week as a van boy for Eason & Son newsagents on Lower Abbey St., Dublin. He was fired from both jobs for disobedience and insubordination. In his teens, he and his brothers formed the Townshend Dramatic Society, which produced plays by Dion Boucicault (qv), Shakespeare, and others. O'Casey performed the role of Fr Dolan in Boucicault's play 'The Shaughraun' at the Mechanics' Theatre in Dublin.

O'Casey worked (1902–December 1911) as a labourer on the Great Northern Railway of Ireland (GNRI). During this period he joined a number of organisations, all of which shaped his political attitudes. In 1906 he studied the Irish language and joined the Drumcondra branch of the Gaelic League, gaelicising his name to Sean Ó Cathasaigh. Two years later, he became the club's secretary. In 1907 he joined the St Laurence O'Toole Club and wrote stories and satirical sketches for the club's newsletter, which was read at meetings. On 25 May his first publication, 'Sound

the loud trumpet', appeared in *The Peasant* and *Irish Ireland*. In 1910 he became a founder-member and first secretary of the St Laurence O'Toole Pipe Band. In 1908 he joined the Irish Republican Brotherhood. Although it was a quiet period in the IRB's history, O'Casey met and befriended many who would play prominent roles in twentieth-century Irish history.

O'Casey joined the Irish Transport and General Workers' Union in 1911, and in December he was dismissed from his job on the GNRI, mainly because of his union membership. The following June, he began to write articles and contributed a regular column to the *Irish Worker*. Within a year, he was appointed secretary of the Wolfe Tone Memorial Committee; of the Women and Children's Relief Fund during the 1913 lockout; and in 1914 of the Irish Citizen Army. In October 1914 he resigned from the Citizen Army in protest at the appointment of Countess Markievicz (qv) to the army's board.

The Abbey plays O'Casey's writing career began in earnest in 1918, with the publication of pamphlets (*The story of the Irish Citizen Army*) and song broadsides. In 1920 his two plays 'The harvest festival' and 'The frost in the flower' were submitted to, and rejected by, the Abbey Theatre. In 1922 two more plays, 'The seamless coat of Kathleen' and 'The crimson in the tricolour', were similarly rejected. But on 17 November 1922, when O'Casey was 42 years old, the Abbey accepted his two-act play, 'The shadow of a gunman'. The play opened on 12 April 1923. On 1 October his one-act play 'Cathleen listens in' premiered at the Abbey. On 3 March 1924 his powerful allegory of the effect of war and other stresses on a family, 'Juno and the paycock', opened at the Abbey. Nearly a year later, 'Juno' and 'Shadow' were published as *Two plays*.

On 8 February 1926 O'Casey's four-act play 'The plough and the stars' premiered at the Abbey Theatre. On the second night nationalist protesters disrupted the performance, protesting against O'Casey's use of the Irish tricolour in a pub, the character of prostitute Rosie Redmond, and the anti-heroic characterisation of the men and women who fought in the 1916 Easter rising. Leading the protesters were Hanna Sheehy-Skeffington (qv) and Maud Gonne (qv). O'Casey had moved to London by the time of the riots, and on 23 March he received the Hawthornden literary prize of £100 for 'Juno and the paycock'. He gave the acceptance speech in Irish.

O'Casey met Eileen Reynolds Carey (Eileen O'Casey (qv)) while she was performing in a London production of his play 'The shadow of a gunman'. On 23 September 1927 they were married in the Catholic Church of All Souls and the Redeemer, Chelsea. On 30 April 1928 they had a son, Breon.

O'Casey's next play was 'The silver tassie', a four-act drama (with expressionist second act) of the first world war. He offered it to the Abbey Theatre, but they rejected it (20 April 1928). It was a different play from that the Abbey directors

– W.B. Yeats (qv), Lady Gregory (qv), *et al.* – expected, and the rejection hurt O'Casey's reputation as a surefire moneymaking playwright, and wounded his pride. He sent his correspondence with the Abbey to a London newspaper, thus forcing the issue into public notoriety. On 11 October 1929, eighteen months after the rejection by the Abbey Theatre, a production of the play opened in London, starring Charles Laughton and several Irish actors.

Changing direction – the 1930s O'Casey's artistic direction was changing. In October 1929 he told an interviewer that he was working on an autobiography, and in November 1931 he finished the first chapter of what would become a monumental six-volume autobiography. Moreover, he was working on a new play, 'Within the gates', an innovative fantasy. The play was published in December 1933 and opened in London at the Royalty Theatre in February 1934.

During the 1930s O'Casey engaged himself less in drama than in discovering the worlds outside of Ireland. He was in demand as lecturer, appearing at St Catherine's College, Cambridge, in 1936. He wrote provocative essays and contentious letters to newspapers, publishing *The flying wasp* in 1937, a collection of articles about the theatre. In 1934 he travelled to the USA, meeting one of his biggest American fans, George Jean Nathan, the leading drama critic of his day. The US premiere of 'Within the gates' was staged at the National Theatre in New York (22 October), starring Lillian Gish. He was invited to give the Morris Gray Poetry Talk at Harvard University (16 November), titling his lecture 'The old drama and the new'. O'Casey arrived back in England in December, a month before his second son, Niall, was born (15 January 1935). Ironically, on that day 'Within the gates' was banned in Boston. In 1935 O'Casey travelled to Dublin for the last time, spending two weeks and becoming reconciled with Yeats. The Irish premiere of 'The silver tassie' was performed at the Abbey Theatre (12 August), and was predictably attacked as anti-Irish and blasphemous.

The 1930s were not a fruitful period for O'Casey's drama. The rise of fascism deepened his involvement in world politics, and none of the plays he wrote during this period was successful. He championed socialist movements around the world, ardently supporting the Soviet Union and various communist parties. In turn, he was a hero to progressives in most western countries, and he carried on a voluminous correspondence with them. In 1938, at the suggestion of Shaw, O'Casey moved to Devon, near the experimental school, Dartington Hall, which all of his children attended. His last child, Shivaun, was born in 1939, the year the first volume of O'Casey's autobiography was published. Titled *I knock at the door*, it was a blend of fantasy and facts, hyperbole and magnificence. Five more volumes followed: *Pictures in the hallway* (1942), *Drums under the windows* (1946), *Inishfallen, fare thee well* (1949), *Rose and crown* (1952), and the last in 1954, *Sunset and evening star*.

Later work The decade 1940–50 was O'Casey's most productive. In addition to three volumes of autobiography, he published five plays, including *The star turns red* and *Purple dust* (both in 1940), *Red roses for me* (1942), *Oak leaves and lavender* (1946), and *Cock-a-doodle dandy* (1949). Within a six-year period, O'Casey lost three long-time friends. Jim Larkin (qv) died in 1947, Shaw in 1950, and Eugene O'Neill in 1953. Moreover, O'Casey's communist sympathies and the cold war led to the cancellation of US productions and publication of his works. 'Cock-a-doodle dandy' was refused a production, and Macmillan in New York decided against publication in 1948. The McCarthyite Tenney committee in California listed O'Casey as a 'dangerous subversive'. 'Red roses for me' opened in Houston, Texas, to protests in 1951. A year later, two planned productions for 'Cock' in New York were abruptly cancelled. In 1953 a German-language production of 'The silver tassie' was staged in Berlin, accompanied by protests. The next year, an amateur London group was forced to cancel 'Bedtime story' from a one-act-play festival after the adjudicator called it 'blasphemous and unsavoury'. That same year, a New York producer contracted for 'Purple dust', but backed out. Still, in 1949, the first two volumes of O'Casey's *Collected plays* appeared. Two years later, volumes three and four were published. He and Eileen O'Casey celebrated twenty-five years of marriage in 1952, and there were productions of his plays in Newcastle upon Tyne; Dallas and Houston, Texas; and Glasgow. O'Casey's play 'The bishop's bonfire' was given a major Dublin production by Cyril Cusack (qv) and Tyrone Guthrie (qv) at the Gaiety Theatre in 1955. However, most critics, still angry at O'Casey's combative politics and his vision of Ireland portrayed in 'Cock-a-doodle dandy', lampooned the play.

Last years; assessment Three years later, O'Casey's relationship with Ireland disintegrated further. His new play, 'The drums of Father Ned', was to be performed at the Dublin Theatre Festival, along with works by Samuel Beckett (qv) and James Joyce (qv). Archbishop John Charles McQuaid (qv) refused to say an inaugural votive mass because of the presence of 'Bloomsday', an adaptation of *Ulysses*, in the festival, and both O'Casey and Beckett withdrew their plays. O'Casey banned further productions of his plays in Ireland, but relented in 1964 for Abbey productions of 'Juno' and 'The plough' at the World Theatre Festival in London. After a second heart attack O'Casey died 18 September 1964 at Torquay; his body was cremated and his ashes scattered in the gardens at Golder's Green cemetery, Middlesex.

For most critics, O'Casey's reputation rests on his first three major plays, 'Gunman', 'Juno', and 'The plough'; his autobiographies; and his voluminous letters (2,436 in four large volumes). There can be little doubt that his reputation was hurt by the rejection of 'The silver tassie', a blow from which he arguably never recovered. Moreover, by not being able to see his later plays on the stage before they appeared in print, he was writing in a void. Some critics have equated commercial failure with artistic failure, but since most have never seen productions of O'Casey's later plays, his legacy as a dramatist remains to be fulfilled.

Archives and portraits Most of O'Casey's papers are at the New York Public Library, NYC. They were purchased in 1968 by the Berg Collection. Details were provided in the *New York Public Library Bulletin* (June 1968). In that same issue is an article by O'Casey's literary executor, Ronald Ayling: 'Sean O'Casey's manuscripts and working methods'. A catalogue of the notebooks and papers was published in *Sean O'Casey: a bibliography* (1978).

In 1996 Robert and Patricia Lowery contributed a large collection of O'Casey miscellanea to Boston College. It included a complete collection of first editions, US and UK; Abbey Theatre posters and ephemera; translations of O'Casey's works into foreign languages; and archival donations from O'Casey enthusiasts from around the world.

Following his three-decade-long work on O'Casey's correspondence, David Krause contributed his notes and many of the playwright's letters to the NLI, which in 2001 acquired a 5,000-item archive from Shivaun O'Casey, the dramatist's daughter. The archive comprises mostly correspondence; there are also, according to a newsletter published by the library (spring 2002), 'scripts, notebooks, music, proofs, posters, programmes, reviews, newspaper cuttings, and memorabilia'. The *National Library of Ireland News*, no. 11 (spring 2003), adds that his entire personal library of 1,800 items, including many signed presentation copies, has been acquired, making the NLI 'the world's largest repository of O'Casey papers and memorabilia'.

O'Casey was magnificently represented in art by the Welsh artist Augustus John (1878–1961), who painted two portraits. The first (May 1926) was in the possession of O'Casey's wife, Eileen, until she died. It was used in the second and subsequent editions of *The plough and the stars*. The other, almost identical (1927), was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum of Art, NYC. A drawing (1926) of O'Casey by Dublin artist Patrick Tuohy (qv) was used in the first edition of *The plough and the stars* (1926) and is in the Hugh Lane Gallery of Modern Art, Dublin. A pen and ink sketch (1927) by Powys Evans and a bromide print (1955) by Wolfgang Suschitzky are in the National Portrait Gallery, London. The portrait (1930) by Harry Kernoff (qv) is in the NGI and a bronze bust (1985) by Helen Hooker O'Malley Roelofs (qv) is in the University of Limerick. A bas-relief of O'Casey by the American sculptor Robert Eakins was contributed to the Abbey Theatre by Robert Lowery.

David Krause, *Sean O'Casey, the man and his work* (1960); Sean O'Casey, *Feathers from a green crow*, ed. Robert Hogan (1962); Martin Margulies, *The early life of Sean O'Casey* (1970); Eileen O'Casey, *Sean* (1971); E. H. Mikhail, *Sean O'Casey: a bibliography of criticism* (1972); Sean O'Casey, *The letters of Sean O'Casey*, ed. David Krause (2 vols, 1975, 1980); Ronald Ayling and Michael Durkan, *Sean O'Casey: a bibliography* (1978); *Dictionary of British portraiture*, iv (1981);

Robert G. Lowery, *Sean O'Casey's autobiography: an annotated index* (1983);
Christopher Murray, *Sean O'Casey: writer at work: a biography* (2006)

Downloaded from <http://dib.cambridge.org> by IP 100.103.238.216 on Sun Nov 29 13:44:49 UTC 2020 Dictionary of Irish Biography Online © 2020 Cambridge University Press and Royal Irish Academy. All rights reserved. Not for commercial use or unauthorized distribution.