

Stuart, (Henry) Francis (Montgomery)

by Colm Tóibín

Stuart, (Henry) Francis (Montgomery) (1902–2000), novelist, was born 29 April 1902 in Townsville, Australia, son of Henry Irwin Stuart, sheep farmer, and Elizabeth Stuart (née Montgomery), Ulster protestants who had married in 1901 in Dervock, Co. Antrim. Stuart's father committed suicide in a psychiatric institution four months after Francis was born, forcing the family to return to Ireland, and he spent his childhood outside Derry, being subsequently educated at Rugby, the English public school where he was an unhappy and unsuccessful student. At the age of 16 he was briefly tutored by H. M. O. White (1885–1963) in preparation for study at TCD, where he met Iseult Gonne (qv), daughter of Maud Gonne MacBride (qv), and this relationship ensured that he moved in literary and nationalist circles and attended the literary gatherings of George Russell (qv) (AE). He subsequently eloped to London with Gonne in January 1920, when he was 17 years old, and she 25. He converted to catholicism for their marriage. Their first daughter, Dolores, died in infancy. They had two more children: a son, Ion (b. 1926), and daughter, Catherine (b. 1931).

Although during the war of independence Stuart was not as republican as the family into which he had married, he volunteered for the anti-treaty forces during the civil war and was interned for eighteen months in various prison camps after travelling to Belgium to procure guns. During his confinement, he wrote a collection of poems, subsequently published in January 1924 as *We have kept the faith*, for which he received an award from the RIA. In the same year Sinn Féin published his pamphlet, *Lecture on nationality and culture*, a scathing critique of the dominance of English culture in Ireland. With the encouragement of the poet W. B. Yeats (qv), he was also joint founder and editor of the short-lived literary magazine *To-morrow*.

In the 1920s and 1930s Stuart lived in Glenree and subsequently in Laragh Castle, both in Co. Wicklow, where he wrote and farmed. During the 1930s, having abandoned his earlier preference for poetry, he became an exceptionally prolific fiction writer, producing eleven novels in that decade alone. They included *Pigeon Irish* (1932), *Glory* (1933), *The coloured dome* (1933), *Things to live for* (1934), and *White hare* (1936). His work was heavily influenced by the tradition of Irish republicanism, with an emphasis on the non-conformist individual and the dilemma of the artist, and he wrote in a formal, flat prose style. An admirer of Éamon de Valera (qv), whom he referred to as 'a democratic genius', he was also critical of democracy and seems to have had some sympathy for fascism, believing contemporary political structures to be rotten. He was regarded as displaying nonchalance towards anti-Semitism and was hostile towards modernity and materialism. Although these themes can be discerned in his work, and he was referred to by some as an 'Irish Dostoyevsky', he was also arguably an author who

defied categorisation. He had a wide variety of interests, and was clearly more interested in individuals and their emotional chaos than in society, reflecting on the meaning of individual existence and the uses that are made of it. He repeatedly delved into the inner consciousness in order to challenge complacency.

His extensive output reflected the changes that occurred in the genre of the novel in the twentieth century, some critics seeing his earlier work as demonstrating a commitment to Yeatsian mysticism and his later novels as representative of a more direct, modern style. He demonstrated a wholehearted commitment to writing and a determination to make it the centre of his life and his means of earning a living, though the frequency with which he wrote inevitably resulted in a canon that is inconsistent and uneven. He also wrote plays, including 'Men crowd round me', produced at the Abbey Theatre in 1933. His confidants regarded him as a kind and gentle man, who was understated and not self-seeking. He remained fascinated by religion, writing a pamphlet for the Catholic Truth Society on mysticism, and he also wrote a book on horseracing, one of his main passions, under the title *Racing in Ireland for pleasure and profit*, published in 1937.

In 1939 he was invited by the Deutsche Akademie to embark on a literary tour of Germany and was subsequently offered a lectureship in Irish and English literature at the University of Berlin. He remained in Germany throughout the war, having accepted work with German radio's propaganda unit, where he translated news bulletins, wrote scripts for William Joyce (qv) ('Lord Haw Haw'), and broadcast his own talks to Ireland for Irland Redaktion, the Third Reich's radio propaganda service for Ireland. His broadcasts between March 1942 and February 1944 were transcribed by Irish military intelligence and BBC monitors and amounted to 45,000 words, and frequently stressed the importance of Irish independence and the need for a closer engagement with the culture of Europe. He did not address literary matters, and made no explicit references to Jews, although coded references to international banking conspiracies do appear. There is no evidence that anti-Semitism motivated him to live in Germany. He does seem to have had contact with the IRA before he left for Germany, shared champagne suppers with Nazi officials, and was interned from November 1945 to July 1946.

Stuart lived at Freiburg 1946–9, then in Paris, and afterwards in London, and did not return to Ireland until 1959. A month after the death of Gonne in March 1954, he married Madeleine Meissner, whom he had met in Berlin. His postwar novels, published by the Jewish publisher Victor Gollancz, included *Redemption* (1949) and *The flowering cross* (1950), *The pillar of cloud* (1948), and *Victors or vanquished* (1958). However, the book for which he is best remembered is the autobiographical *Black list, section H*, written in the third person and the past tense, and published in 1971 by the Southern Illinois University Press when Stuart's public profile was relatively low. The previous year, the Abbey Theatre had rejected his play 'Who dares to speak', about the Irish war of independence martyr Terence MacSwiney (qv). His two Northern Ireland novels were also published in this decade, *Memorial*

(1973) and *A hole in the head* (1977). After 1982 the Irish novelist Dermot Bolger's Raven Press published eleven of his works. *Black list, section H* remains Stuart's masterpiece, not only for its interesting content and its playful use of the most private, almost whispering tone while involving its protagonist in public events, but because of its raw and relentless honesty and its quietly resigned and wise way of facing up to the past in all its mixture of horror and strange comedy. He married for the third time in 1987, to the artist Finola Graham.

Stuart's wartime experiences in Germany remained more controversial than his literary output. He rarely discussed the issue, but did, on one occasion, when asked about the broadcasts, respond: 'Je ne regrette rien', and he also apologised 'for the hurt I caused by appearing to support the Nazis'. There were protests in 1996–7 when he was elected to the honorific position of Saoi by Aosdána, the Irish arts academy, and over comments he made in a Channel 4 documentary on the anti-Semitic Limerick boycott in 1904, when he made reference to a line in *Black list, section H*: 'if there were a Jewish idea, which was surely a contradiction, it was a hidden, unheroic and critical one, a worm that could get into a lot of fine-looking fruit'. He died on 2 February 2000 in Ennis, Co. Clare.

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Geoffrey Elborn, *Francis Stuart: a life* (1990); *Ir. Times*, 3, 5 Feb. 2000; Brendan Barrington (ed.), *The wartime broadcasts of Francis Stuart* (2000); Anne McCartney, *Francis Stuart: face to face* (2000)