

Thompson, Samuel (Sam)

by Nicholas Allen

Thompson, Samuel (Sam) (1916–65), playwright and shipyard worker, was born 21 May 1916 at 2 Montrose Street, Ballymacarrett, Belfast, one of the eight children of Hugh Thompson, lamplighter and part-time sexton of the Church of Ireland St Clement's church, and his wife, Margaret, née Johnston. He attended school locally and then followed his four brothers into the shipyard of Harland and Woolf as an apprentice painter in 1930; his father had died by this time.

He attended a National Council of Labour Colleges summer school in Paris in 1939; by then he had left the shipyard to paint for the Belfast corporation. A shop steward of the National Amalgamated Society of Operative House and Ship Painters and Decorators, he remained a union member for the rest of his life. He was released from corporation employment and painted as a private contractor before Sam Hanna Bell (qv) heard him talk of his working life in the BBC pub, the Elbow Room, in Belfast in 1955. Bell encouraged him to write of his experiences and he responded with his first radio script, *Brush in hand* (1956), a realistic account of his shipyard days. Jimmy Ellis, a producer at the Ulster Group Theatre, soon accepted his play 'Over the bridge' (1957). Set between the shipyard and the kitchen of the union organiser Davy Mitchell, the play exposes the class manipulation that underpins sectarianism and pitches the fraternity of trade unionism against religious solidarity. The play ends with Mitchell's death, in defence of a catholic co-worker, and is notable both for its working-class voice and for its disturbing portrait of an unnamed protestant mob leader. A conservative theatre management rejected the play at rehearsal stage on the grounds that it would cause public disturbance. Rejecting the cuts demanded from his work, he left the theatre with Ellis and successfully sued it for breach of contract, settling for £175 out of court. The play was first produced at Belfast's Empire variety theatre on 26 January 1960 and ran with huge success for six weeks before transferring to Dublin, Glasgow, Edinburgh, Brighton and London. It was broadcast on independent television in 1961.

Thompson wrote three seasons of *The Fairmans*, the story of an east Belfast family and a successor to *The McCooeys* by Joseph Tomelty (qv), for the BBC Northern Ireland Home Service from 1959 to 1961. He acted in his next play, 'The evangelist' (1963), first performed at the Grand Opera House, Belfast, on 3 June with Ray McAnally (qv) playing the American pastor John Earls. A rare look in northern drama at the effects of religious revivalism, the play is a dark but entertaining examination of evangelism's attraction to the vulnerable. Its weakness, however, is the occasional inability of characters like the sick Johnny Bradford convincingly to voice the complexity of their mental and physical impairment. 'Cemented with love' (1964) was his first play written for television, but it was not broadcast until May 1965 because of its controversial subject matter, an election

between unionist and nationalist candidates. The dynastic aspect to Irish politics is well documented as the unionist incumbent pushes his son to succeed him, unaware that he has married a Roman catholic. The drama is interspersed with some sharp comic writing; the unionist personators who use votes from lists of the borough's deceased observe that the dead are with us in spirit. The young unionist loses but his final speech is a remarkable call for social tolerance. In 1964 Thompson stood as Labour candidate in what Stewart Parker (qv) described as the extraordinarily unsuitable, because of its settled middle-class electorate, borough of South Down. He was defeated and returned to work on his unfinished play, 'The masquerade' (1965). Set in London, this text suggests a new departure in its dramatisation of the strange world of an obsessive whose delusions revolve around his collection of Nazi memorabilia.

Heart trouble dogged him from June 1961 and overwork induced a fatal collapse in the offices of the Northern Ireland Labour Party in Belfast on 15 February 1965; he died on the way to hospital. He married in 1947 and lived thereafter at Craigmore Street on the Ormeau Road with his wife, May, and their only son, Warren, born in 1953. A grand celebrity concert was organised in his memory at the Gaiety Theatre in Dublin on 4 April 1965. His papers, which include his four major plays, four other unfinished works and his radio features, are held in the Belfast Central Library.

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*Ir. Times*, 16 Feb. 1965; *Times*, 16 Feb. 1965; Robert Hogan, *After the Irish renaissance* (1967), 100, 102, 196; Sam Thompson, *Over the bridge* (1970); Sam Hanna Bell, *The theatre in Ulster* (1972), 92, 94–6; Hagal Mengel, *Sam Thompson and modern drama in Ulster* (1986); Terence Brown, *Ireland's literature* (1988), 242; Richard Pine, *Brian Friel and Ireland's drama* (1990), 104–5; Seamus Deane et al. (ed.), *Field Day anthology of Irish writing* (1991), vol. 3, 1176–81; Sam Thompson, *Over the bridge and other plays* (1997); Edna Longley, *The living stream* (1994), 97, 99, 110, 127–8; Christopher Murray, *Twentieth-century Irish drama* (1997), 189–90, 195–6