

Sean O'Casey, Writer at Work: A Biography. By Christopher Murray. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2005. 590 pp. \$44.95 cloth.

Sean O'Casey was a myth-maker. Adopting the role of spokesperson for the Irish working class, O'Casey (born John Casey) created a version of his life suited to such a role. He became the youngest of thirteen children rather than the youngest of seven (possibly eight). Others who knew O'Casey also created versions of him that were not always complimentary. As a man who threw himself into the political debates of the times, O'Casey made many enemies and friends in Ireland, so many contemporary views of the writer, both positive and negative, are seen through the haze of politics and the specific writer's attitude toward O'Casey. This naturally presents a problem for a biographer who has the daunting task of sorting through not only O'Casey's own exaggerations but the exaggerations of those who would flatter him and those who would censure him.

Christopher Murray does an admirable job of uncovering the truth of O'Casey's life, giving a comprehensive account of the many personal, political, and literary squabbles that drove not only O'Casey but those who opposed him as well. Perhaps the most famous moment Murray depicts is when W. B. Yeats took the stage in attempt to out-shout those nationalists protesting O'Casey's *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), which refused to be Nationalist propaganda. O'Casey also often fell foul of the government censors, heavily influenced by the Catholic Church. Mystifyingly, Murray seems at times surprised by the censoring of O'Casey's later work, pointing out that none of the banned works are obscene. No one who has read the first 250 pages of the biography, showing that obscenity is usually beside the point, should be surprised by this.

The one major qualm about this biography is that Murray tends to read too much of O'Casey's biography into his published work. Murray shows how O'Casey alters "reality" in plays such as *Red Roses for Me*, stating that O'Casey could only bring reality to his art by suppressing the personal elements of the situation. At times, Murray won't allow O'Casey's characters to stand on their own, instead expecting them to represent real people in O'Casey's life. His plays, after all, are art, not history, no matter how close to O'Casey's real life they seem to be.

Still, this is an important addition to O'Casey scholarship. Past biographies of O'Casey, while valuable documents in understanding O'Casey and his work, are understandably limited. The early biographers, often friends, felt it necessary to justify O'Casey's worthiness as a subject, entering the political battle that engulfed O'Casey's life. Others written during his life or shortly after his death lacked the distance to see O'Casey's work in its totality with objectivity. Murray's biography brings to bear that more objective context and should be read by anyone interested in O'Casey.

—Steve Cloutier, St. Mary's University, Canada