

TWO LETTERS OF SEAN O'CASEY

Introductory Note by Ken Coates

THE two letters of Sean O'Casey which follow were written ten years ago and it may be necessary to explain how they came to be written. The first one appears to be a reply to a request for advice about how to write. In fact, it was not quite that. I originally wrote to O'Casey to ask him his views on socialist realism, because I had been reading his work systematically, and had been led on from it to read Joyce. This had led me to the conclusion that O'Casey himself had nothing to do with socialist realism, and that if socialist realism had anything to do with art, it was purely accidental. His first reply clearly confirmed that he shared these views, so I wrote to him again, asking him why he did not express such opinions publicly, since if he and other great Communist artists like Brecht, Guttuso and Picasso were to speak up, the whole cramping, debilitating nonsense would be completely discredited. His second letter did not directly answer this question; but I read it as implying an answer, that if we "first removed the beam from our own eye" we should see that the enemy of art in Britain was not Zdanov but the liberal establishment.

O'Casey would never cross the lines of the battle he fought all his life. Now that he is dead, I think his letters should be published, if only to set the record straight. Socialists today find themselves in a very different climate from that of 1955. The old irrationalities and neuroses which afflicted the Communist world then have begun to yield, and men can evaluate the world in a saner atmosphere. The alignments are daily becoming easier to see. No intelligent reader today could misread O'Casey's message in these letters.

For all that the rejuvenation of the socialist movement since 1956 has produced in the arts, and for all that it is creating at the present moment, still unseen, we shall produce few men indeed who will be as good, and as constant, as Sean O'Casey was. In these letters can be seen a small part of the burden he had to carry.

I

Flat 3, 40 Trumlands Road, St. Marychurch, **Torquay**, Devon.

1st July, 1955

Ken Coates, Esq.

Dear Ken Coates,

You are a young miner, a Communist, and you want to write. Well, you couldnt want to do a worse thing. It is the most precarious of employments, without any chance of a dole. If you persist, then hold on to your job, and write in your hour of leisure; unless you can get another job that may be more suitable under the circumstances; but till you are sure of an alternative job, stick to the one you have. I couldnt say for certain that I could see you if you came down to Devon. That would all depend on the circumstances of the time; I have a lot to do between work and family affairs, and cant make definite arrangements to meet all who wish to come to see me. There has been a lot of 'Socialist' blather about 'socialist realism', without any who wrote about it having an idea of what it is or what it meant. What is it, anyhow? Remember that Life comes first, even before socialism; and that socialism must be adapted to life not life to socialism. A writer must write of the life around him; what he sees, feels, and hears, corresponding with life through his senses; there is no other way. And the life of England, of Ireland, Scotland, Wales, the Channel Islands, and the Isle of Man is a complex one, bewildering, lively, dull, selfish, generous, and so on. And what a complex thing is one human life alone! All it has to deal with, within himself, without from the life of others. Zdanov —of whom you have heard, I daresay — didntknow what he was talking about; and all who echoed him in the Daily Worker, and elsewhere, knew a damned sight less. Read Harry Pollitt's writing, his 'diary' while he toured India, his biography, and, however good a lad he is—and he is clever, sincere, and good-hearted—he hasnt the faintest idea of how to do it, or anything but the faintest idea about literature in general. James Joyce would but irritate him; and the same can be said for 90% of the Communists of England. They are shamefully and shamelessly ignorant of their own greatness in the achievements of the English people. The Soviet Writers are realising all this now. The other week, a prominent Soviet Writer came here to discuss with me a proposal to publish in the USSR all my biographical books, which, alone, shows the change that has or is taking place there in literary thought and desire. I wonder how many 'communists' have read Strindberg's *Dream Play*? Yet in this play, in a few lines, integral parts of the drama, the dramatist, proclaims the whole gospel of socialism. Again, Keats, who is never mentioned in the Worker, lets us know in fourteen lines the implication of all that Marx and Engels ever wrote.

The worst formalism that I know of is the formalism of the chattering phrases uttered and muttered by the communists themselves.

The Communist must be interested in everything, must know something about everything; he must talk to the shepherd about sheep, the farmer about crops! I listen to the talk about farming problems on the B.B.C. and Radio Eireann, whenever I get a chance—to the doctor about surgery and medicine, to the priest about religion, and to the worker about work. So, instead of going about always teaching, the Communist should be always going about learning. The Communists I have met, and I've met many, know too damned much, without knowing anything at all; a lot of them are the dullest humans imaginable; and do a tremendous lot of harm to the Communist cause.

And, because of this ignorance, they do the most stupid things. They dont know how to talk about anything outside of a socialist pamphlet. They make me sick.

Robbie Bums was a communist of his day, but he had time and the desire to sing 'My love is like a red, red rose.'

The Flying Wasp has been long out of print. The critics didnt like it, and no wonder. At the moment, oddly enough, I am going over it again, for it is to be published—or so the prospect goes—with other articles of mine, in a volume to be issued by a New York publisher. So one day—if your desires hold out—you may be able to get it after all.

Finally, for I am very busy, dont attempt to write, unless you feel an irresistible and insufferable desire to do so. Fight against the desire; but if it conquers, well, then, go ahead, in the name of God and Man; but hold on to a job till you **KNOW** that your work will bring in enough to keep you.

All good wishes to the young miner.
Yours very sincerely,

Sean O'Casey.

II

Flat 3, 40 Trumlands Road, St. Marychurch, **Torquay**, Devon.

Ken Coates, Esq.

17 July, 1955

Dear Ken,

You are an insistent lad. Sorry, I didnt make my opinion clear in my last letter. Still, I'm not sure of what you want to know. First, I **havent** the faintest idea of what 'Socialist Realism' is, and I dont think anyone else has either. I've read miles of opinions about it, from Zdanov down to Howard Fast, and cant yet get the swing of it. I dont bother anyway to make sure, since I know something about the Realism and the Fantasy of life, which are more important than any theory. Yes, I agree that a lot of Communists are as dogmatic as any cleric; stupidly so; and I have had many a dose of boredom from them. But you have this ritualistic formulism or formalism among the liberal leaders of thought and

literature here, just as many as in any other place. For instance, the Drama Critic of *The Times Literary Supplement* said not long ago that 'the British People had decided to ignore O'Casey because of his lamentable judgements.' There's one for you. And, Indeed, so they have, for it's little I get from them three times more from Ireland, and as much from Israel and Germany; but 95% of what I get comes from the USA. What in hell have you got to do with Zdanovism? Is England not big enough for You? The USSR has her own way of walking, thinking, and hoping, and the Soviet People must evolve from their own environment and activities; England from Her's, of which you are part. Communism will come, sooner or later, to all countries, but not necessarily in the same way everywhere. It hasn't come to the USSR yet; but, I believe, it is on its good way. What remains for all is to live in peace, and for each to work out its own salvation in its own way; and that is the way things will have to go now, for force no longer can be used without wiping out everything—Communism included. Zdanov is dead, out of date now; and always was. But remember, the artist everywhere will have a hard task to get a living; good if he gets a loaf, a flask of wine, and a girl. I myself have been condemned by most; after *Juno*, the Sunday Worker in a letter referred me to a Judas; Mike Gold a prominent Left-winger in USA, after *Within the Gates* appeared in New York, wrote a whole seething column of abuse; the other day, 20 years after, he wrote another one bubbling with praise. What do I care whether he praises or blames? He doesn't know a damn thing about literature or art. Read what Worsley said about *Sunset and Evening Star*. If these lads had the power that Zdanov had, what would happen to us? Let us remove the beam from our own eye before we busy ourselves with the mote in our brother's. The USSR is now beginning to prepare for the translation of my work—after 30 years of friendship. I've never asked them to do it; or have I ever asked anyone to take an interest in me—bar once when more than 40 years ago I sent an effort to G.B.S. for his opinion, and got a reply! This I acted on—'depend on yourself, and be published for your own sake'—I suggested he should write a preface! By the way, the finest collection of Picassos is in the USSR, whose collection of Modern Art—got when they hardly had a red rex (a penny)—is second to none. Brecht is, I think, now in Moscow. I had his manager here the other day, who told me his 'Ma Courage' is to be done there. The USSR has respect for Hauptman.

If you are going to write, write then, and don't bother about the gibbering Marx-theorists, who can prate like Poll, but don't understand in their minds what their mouths are spouting. This is the one and only way I suggest. You do as I do—if you write, write, and to hell with all opinions as to how you do it.

Are you doing N. Service in the mines? Must end now. The God of Marx, Lenin, and Stalin (three geniuses) be with you. Sean O'C.