

## 'THE EMPIRE TRILOGY'

Early in 1979, at the age of 44, the author decided to leave London and take up residence on the Sheep's Head Peninsula in West Cork. "I've been trying to write" he admitted "but there are so many competing interests – the prime one at the moment is fishing off the rocks.

On 11<sup>th</sup> August a large wave seems to have knocked him off a rock whilst fishing in Bantry Bay. His body was washed out to sea. It was discovered a month later by a farmer near Castletownbere on the far side of Bantry Bay. In spite of some newspaper speculation to the contrary, the Coroner's verdict was 'Accidental Drowning'.

Six years earlier J.G.Farrell had won the Booker Prize for his novel 'The Siege of Krishnapur'. He was a man who elevated privacy to a high art. His legacy was the 'Empire Trilogy', now hailed as a classic of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I was interested in Jim Farrell's writing career because he was my French teacher at Castle Park School in Dalkey near Dun Laoghaire in the early 1950s. I was twelve at the time. We were good friends outside the classroom as we were both keen on rugby and other sports. He had a good sense of humour, but there was something elusive about him. I had no idea that he was going to be a writer. He had plenty of girl friends – often several at the same time – but he never married.

I loved that school, but it seems that Jim Farrell did not. According to Lavinia Greacen's biography, he thought that the clock had stopped there in 1904. It reflected the loyalties of its founder W. P Toone who still taught there. These were the Crown, the Services, and Cricket – and not necessarily in that order. Farrell was fascinated with Donald Pringle, Toone's successor, who ran the school with total dedication; but who he thought was a frightful snob. The School was later reflected in the Majestic Hotel in his novel 'Troubles'.

Farrell was born in Liverpool into a family with an Irish background. From the age of twelve he attended Rossall Public School in Fleetwood. At about this time his parents moved to Dublin, and from then on Farrell spent much time in Ireland. This, perhaps combined with the popularity of 'Troubles', leads some to treat him as an Irish writer. In 1956, a few years after I knew him, he went to study at Brasenose College, Oxford. Whilst there he

contacted a serious case of polio; and for some time his life was in danger. He was disabled for the rest of his life.

He published his first novel '*A Man from Elsewhere*' in 1963. Set in France, it shows the clear influence of French Existentialism. It lacks the ironic humour and the tender appreciation of human frailty which characterise his later work. It seems that he later disliked this book.

In 1965 Farrell published '*The Lung*' in which he wrote about his own real-life drama of a few years earlier. The main character Martin Sands contracts polio and has to spend a long period in hospital.

In 1967 he published '*A Girl in the Head*' set in the fictional English seaside town of Maidenhair Bay. Like the two previous books, this book had only a moderate critical and public reaction. Had his career ended at this point, he would probably have been considered to be a minor writer. His next novel showed that he was a writer of talent and sensibility.

'*Troubles*' published in 1970 is the first instalment of his acclaimed 'Empire Trilogy' preceding the 'The Siege of Krishnapur' and 'The Singapore Grip'. It won the 1971 Faber Memorial Prize. Although there are similar themes within the three novels, especially the British Empire, they do not form a sequence of storytelling. 'Troubles' concerns the dilapidation of a once grand Majestic Hotel running alongside political upheaval during the Irish War of Independence (1919-1921).

The novel concerns the arrival of Brendan Archer, an English Major recently discharged from the British Army, at the Majestic Hotel on the Wexford coast in 1919. He is convinced that he is engaged to Angela Spencer, the daughter of the elderly owner of the Hotel. She has written to him since they met in 1916. The Spencers are a strongly Unionist Anglo-Irish Protestant family. Archer is a confused observer of the dysfunctional Spencer family, representing the Anglo-Irish and the local Catholic population. As the novel progresses, social and economic relationships break down, mirrored by the gentle decay of the Hotel.

Farrell uses the environment of the run-down hotel to reflect the attitudes of the historically privileged Anglo-Irish, in denial of the overwhelming majority of Republicans. Everything is seen through the eyes of the 'Big House' characters. The 'Native Irish' remain oddly baffling to the narrator.

Whilst the Irish War of Independence forms the background of the novel, the political upheaval is only treated in the chance remarks of the characters. A television film version of 'Troubles' was directed by Christopher Morahan in 1988.

*'The Siege of Krishnapur'* published in 1973 is inspired by events like the sieges of Cawnpore and Lucknow. It describes the siege of a fictional Indian town during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. It is seen only from the perspective of the British residents. The main characters find themselves subject to the increasing deprivation of the siege. This reverses the "normal" structure of life where Europeans governed the Indians. The appearance of small piles of chapattis (small flat cakes of unleavened bread) are the first sign that something is amiss in the Indian community; but many of the British do not realise it. The absurdity of the class system in a town no one can leave becomes a source of comedy. The novel has been criticised sometimes for failing to treat the Indian experience of British rule in any detail.

'The Siege of Krishnapur', along with the other novels in the Trilogy, offer an unequalled picture of the follies of Empire. It had a variety of positive reviews, and won the Booker Prize in 1973. The author used his acceptance speech to attack Booker McConnell for the working conditions on their estates. In 2008 the book was short-listed with six other former winners for 'The Best of the Booker'.

There were serious discussions about making a film of 'The Siege'. This would probably have set Farrell up for life financially. He had a meeting with his hero Fred Zinnemann - Director of 'High Noon' and 'From Here to Eternity' - at Zinnemann's request. He decided that he did not know enough about the Raj, or the British mentality, to make the film. However his friend David Lean thought that it would make "the most wonderful film". Lean took out a year's option on the book; but the film was never made much to Farrell's disappointment. A radio version of 'The Siege', recorded in Belfast, was serialised on Radio 4 a few weeks ago.

*'The Singapore Grip'* published in 1978 was Jim Farrell's last completed work. It charts the decline of the British Empire in Asia. The action takes place in Singapore on the eve of the Japanese invasion during World War 2. It focuses on the life of a wealthy colonial family and provides intelligent insight into one of the pillars of the Empire: the rubber industry.

As usual with Farrell, the narrative is threaded through with dark humour. Draped everywhere are vignettes of colonial life and English eccentricity. No one suspects that the world of the British Empire, of fixed boundaries between classes and nations, is coming to a terrible end. The author makes a serious effort to understand the lives of millions of poor and oppressed people – and also the Japanese.

**Eric Browett**

May 2009