

JAMES SIMMONS: A POET LIKE NO OTHER

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Widely hailed as one of the leading lights of the Northern Irish literary renaissance, Simmons's name is most often linked to the review *The Honest Ulsterman* which, at considerable personal expense, he founded in 1968. The second and no less remarkable venture with which he is credited was the setting up of the Poets' House, an academy to train fledgling bards and creative writing. Initially based in Co. Antrim they have now moved to Co. Donegal in the North West of Ireland.

Now in his mid-sixties, with a sizeable body of work in print, James Simmons is not easily classified. Drawing on sources as diverse as the masters of the poetic art Yeats and Kavanagh, translated work from Gaelic but also the language of the patriotic ballad and even jazz and blues, crossed here and there with the journalistic punchline and the bar-room jibe, James has always addressed ordinary folk. Deliberately seeking out a language close to the idioms and cadences of ordinary speech, he has never concealed his mistrust of literary elitism. While this is a principle poets have claimed since the heyday of romanticism, one feels that Simmons has been a truer apostle than many. His extraordinary talents as folk singer/guitarist have undoubtedly worked to his advantage here.

Coming from a narrow conventional Presbyterian background, James felt alienated early on in life. As he puts it "the crude puritanical ethos of my local church ... was a cover for simple-minded lust for power and money." In reaction, he has always cultivated a fierce independence of mind. It is hardly surprising that this defiant and outspoken loner has made enemies from time to time. Speaking of the experiences of his wife Janice and himself, he says: "We just hear of their gossip secondhand ... and shrug our shoulders." The basic philosophy may be gleaned from a poem penned sometime in 1973:

Tough reasonableness and lyric grace

Together, in poor man's dialect.
Something that no one taught us to
expect.

A sworn enemy of cant and hypocrisy, he is forever seeking after "Profundity without the po-face." While this formula may have restricted the poet's development in certain areas, it has mostly spawned an art-form which is refreshingly clear-cut in its statements and honest in its sentiments.

Ordinary existence forms the raw material of much of the work. Yet, simple details can sometimes yield results which surprise through their self-mocking ironies. In *Domestic Act* (1985) straightening crumpled shirts becomes a *gentler mystery than cooking*, where the steam iron's:

sharp prow is proud as a gunboat
and it rules the waves now into total
smoothness, warm absolute calm.

In this way, an everyday difficulty is transformed into a metaphor about the conquest of peace.

Elsewhere, a bunch of berries in a red jar on the writing table steadies the poet's nerves since it is "a shrine, a statue, familiar in every detail." A good deal of poet's work is pervaded in one critic's words by a *generous opening out towards life*. A sincere and intuitive feeling of love is present in much of the work. This is often overtly erotic as when he writes in the *Two Libertines*:

Give us a kiss, woman

We have talked long enough
And we have plenty in common
See is it love.

But it can also be of righteous concern for humanity in general such as one sees in about their business on a sunny day, goes on to describe the appalling carnage which results when an IRA bomb explodes in the town centre.

And Christ, little Katherine Aiken is dead

And Mrs McLoughlin is pierced through the head
Meanwhile to Dungiven the killers have gone,
And they're finding it hard to get through on the phone.

The supreme irony lies in the fact that the IRA, having blown up the telephone exchange a few weeks before, are unable to phone through a warning for the town to be cleared. Few, if any poets writing during this period managed to capture the horror and tragedy of such incidents.

The poet's most important book to appear in recent years is entitled *Mainstream* (1995). While many of the earlier themes of love, marital problems and loneliness are present, the main image to emerge is of that of an established poet and family man enjoying the leisures of his later years. *Boats in a Tempest* describes being caught in a storm when out yachting in the company of a more enthusiastic friend. The poet who *didn't feel like sailing* is continually thrown off balance as the vessel appears to be going underr:

...Still, a wave runs
by laws, powerful but not surprising.
There was no malice in this grabbing and
Buffeting.

Man is seen to come face to face with the forces of nature, destructive but unfeeling. Although, it has sometimes been suggested that Simmons lacks a stable defining myth, it can be argued that is absolute candour and immediacy with which he confronts the hostile environment relieves him from any such need. Simmons is able to accept the world on its own terms. Despite the dangers inherent in the situation, he can meditate on the violent seascape's tormented beauty, "undistracted by detail, smiling" as he glimpses another boat emerge happily from the same relentless ocean. The ending is a sparse and factual as a newspaper headline:

None of us drowned.

This guarded optimism forms a central and recurrent element in Simmons's message. Though everything turns out all right, the flat understatement invites us to think about a *contrary* outcome. We are forcefully reminded that death is an everpresent part of the human condition, whether by shipwreck or otherwise. One might even extend the comparison to poems like *Claudy* where death and life, the forces of life and annihilation sit in shocking juxtaposition. In short, Simmons is a poet humanity would do well to heed and take seriously.

WORKS CITED

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