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Death's Dominion

JOHN KENNY

The Stealing Steps

By John Arden

Methuen, 319pp. £14.99

“... But Age with his stealing steps/Hath claw'd me in his clutch ...” Signalled by the *Hamlet* epigraph, death creeps - sometimes sulkily, sometimes comically - through the variable lengths and settings of John Arden's nine new stories. The thematic design is emergent rather than imposed. In a “pessimistic afterword” to *The Stealing Steps* Arden explains: “It was not until I put the stories together to form a volume that it occurred to me that each of them, in its own fashion, dealt with the approach to old age, the vagaries of old age, the ‘rage against the dying of the light’ ...”.

Arden's big themes are known primarily through his plays: *Armstrong's Last Goodnight* (1964) and, especially, *Sergeant Musgrave's Dance* (1959) are widely regarded as classics of the modern British stage. The inventive historicism famously demonstrated in these great plays has figured more monumentally however in Arden's singular and tome-like fiction. His previous three novels and one story collection dealt with the nexus of the quotidian and the essential in human life through an array of geographical and historical settings: Egypt in the twelfth and first centuries BC; late fifteenth-century Germany; Ireland in the 1500s; Napoleonic France; nineteenth-century Liverpool; twentieth-century Northern Ireland and Britain.

In *The Stealing Steps*, Ireland, especially the Galway where Arden has lived since 1971, features heavily as both setting and socio-political sub-theme through two story groups. After four individual stories, there are two pieces concerning Molly Concannon, a kind of Galway Crazy Jane whose semi-demented obsessions lead her into battle for asylum seekers and against a “State-of-the-Art Development”. These are followed by three longer stories, variations on the “Perplexities of an Old-fashioned Englishman” named Spike Oldroyd. There are some autobiographical parallels between this cranky Englishman-in-Galway and Arden, but presumably these apply thematically rather than literally when Oldroyd finds himself heatedly confronting the Gardaí, multinational corporatism and puritanism in Oregon.

The cleverly designed and topical final Oldroyd piece, “The Fagsucker”, with a raging death at its conclusion, is matched by the first and perhaps finest story, “Barbara”, in which a succubus competes for attention with revolutionary happenings in fourteenth-century Yorkshire. Two other stories are set amidst the dramaturgical machinations of Regency and *fin de siècle* London respectively; the headiness of these is counteracted by “Secret Chats”, a perverse public-schoolboy confession by a mortally ill old man.

All these tales and settings are controlled by a third-person voice narrating in a sympathetically knowing, tragic-comic tone. As artist figures and writers of eager testimonies, the people of *The Stealing Steps* are all, in one way or another, on the way out; but by the evidence of the theatrical mood and picaresque sprightliness of this controlling voice Arden himself is far from word or world weary.

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