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# Between Heaven and Earth

**John Kenny**

## **Havoc, In Its Third Year**

By Ronan Bennett

Bloomsbury

244pp, £16.99

More historical fiction would be more reason to wonder whether Irish novelists are helplessly turning their back on, or cleverly and obliquely facing, a confusing contemporary world were it not for the fact that Ronan Bennett is something of a special case. Notoriously so: As a young Belfast republican in the 1970s, he was convicted of the murder of a policeman and spent eighteen months at Long Kesh before clearing his name. He subsequently spent as much time again on remand at Brixton before successfully defending himself against accusations of conspiracy to cause explosions and an exclusion order banning him from England.

Having had history so heavily thrust upon him, Bennett has engaged quite directly in his writing with modern Irish and world politics. His first novel, *The Second Prison* (1991), concerned the post-prison life of a republican who tries to discover the truth about the situation that led to his sentence for murder. His second novel, more patently a political thriller, widened the frame of conscientious reference: *Overthrown by Strangers* (1992), set in Northern Ireland and the trouble spots of Latin America, testified to his natural determination to face up to disturbing actualities. "I can't write about people who are stable and successful", he says: "They have to be fragile, come from a background which has political and social tensions, where people have to cope with violence and death."

This preferred subject area has proved more creatively successful as its autobiographical aspects have become more implicit. *The Catastrophist* (1998), the novel that, as a Whitbread Award finalist, consolidated Bennett's reputation, is set during the bloody emergence of a republic in the Congo in and around 1960, but it is also clearly about contemporary Northern Ireland, not so much by allegorical proxy as by the organic relation Bennett clearly sees between situations of conflict at different times and in different places.

His beautifully produced new novel does not take us so far away in place but it does transport us considerably in time. *Havoc, In Its Third Year* is set in northern England in the early 1630s amidst pre-Civil War religious conflict and anti-Catholic Puritanism. Mired in the social and political turbulence and deepening zealotry, the story of one John Brigge emerges, told in the third person through a sequence of thirty-one manageable chapters.

Brigge is coroner in a small but judicially volatile town and he is called in from his farm some distance away to adjudicate on the fate of an Irishwoman, Katherine Shay, who stands accused of infanticide by bloodthirsty authorities. Realistically though nonetheless apocryphally aligning dark heavenly yearning and earthbound ambition, Bennett constructs, even more starkly than in *The Catastrophist*, a set of moral quandaries that, in the end, are arguably unresolved. The drama of Brigge's conscience is the tension between quietism and commitment: a covert Catholic

troubled by dreams and auguries and an act of infidelity, he becomes increasingly convinced of Shay's innocence and has to decide if the preservation of his integrity is worth the provocation of paranoid and suspicious agents and the endangerment of his wife and newborn son.

The story depends for its effects on mood rather than event. Bennett has extensive experience in screen writing and he makes very economical use of action here to support the brooding unmasking of a soul. While the town tortures itself into chaos, tragedy befalls Brigge's family and he spends much time amidst paupers, tavern keepers and friends-become-enemies in an effort to properly collect evidence. The one possible flaw in characterisation is the subject of Brigge's personal crusade: Katherine Shay frequently fades too much into the background and, when she does appear, she is too much the type of the Wild Irish Girl railing against England. This is counterbalanced, however, by the complex character of Brigge's aide, Adam, who gradually succumbs to Puritan rhetoric.

A convincing use of period vocabulary ("wapentakes", "posset", "maymarions" ...) and thoroughly assimilated detail on seventeenth-century England is facilitated by Bennett's work for a Ph.D. thesis on Revolutionary England. Along with modern scholarship, Bennett indicates in his acknowledgements an incorporation of a range of "voices" from the time (Clarendon, Cromwell, Pepys ...). The novel's protagonist is modelled on a John Brigge who performed inquisitions in the West Riding of Yorkshire in the 1640s and '50s.

Despite Bennett's facility for love scenes, his typically bleak outlook is deepened here – perhaps inevitably, given his material. His conviction is that life on the ground, and therefore the kind of fiction that opens that ground, is a deadly serious business. Ironically, he is a kind of purist. The motives of fiction are for him always to be suspected as fraudulent. For a writer bothered for a long time (courtesy of the influence of a Long Kesh Marxist) by the bourgeois aspirations of novelists, the very act of writing patently has less to do with self-delighting smartness or the banal *realpolitik* of careerism than with the red-raw flaying of both private human passion and the public world in which it operates. Down to the conflagration at the end, *Havoc* sustains a religious profundity with a plain style that is the product of over five years of conscientious honing.

By all accounts, Ronan Bennett has made a stoic accommodation with his own afflictive past. Artistically, he is equally clearheaded: the researcher of this historical novel has history well off his back and securely under his belt.

**John Kenny is an IRCHSS Government of Ireland Post-Doctoral Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Human Settlement and Historical Change, NUI Galway.**