



BOOK REVIEW:

*Space for Peace: Fragments of the Irish  
Troubles in the Science Fiction of Bob Shaw  
and James White*

*Jim Clarke*

Howard, Richard. *Space for Peace: Fragments of the Irish Troubles in the Science Fiction of Bob Shaw and James White*. Liverpool UP, 2021. ISBN 978-1800348264.

It has been easy to forget the SF of Bob Shaw and James White. They were, after all, two middle-aged, white, male authors who wrote mostly in the 1970s and 1980s, whose work is mostly that hoariest of SF sub-genres, the space opera, and who espoused cautious politics. They were prolific but not professional writers, in that both had day jobs. They both began as fans, and the only award either won was Shaw's double Hugo for fan writing. They lived their lives in Northern Ireland. It would be all too easy to misread them as parochial outposts of the SF galaxy.

Yet in their lonely championing of futurism in a land hidebound by its own past, Shaw and White are actually hugely significant. Furthermore, their engaging classic-style SF is also enormously readable. Kudos then to Richard Howard for excavating their legacies from the rubble of Irish futurism and reminding us of all their myriad achievements. Howard has done something difficult, brave, and strenuous in producing this study of their work. Academic reviews are often prone to polite hyperbole, but it must be stressed just how important a study this really is.

How so? Well, it's difficult to overstate the neglect of SF in Irish cultural analysis. Possibly the only greater neglect is that of Irish SF within SF Studies. It took until 2014 for the first substantial analysis, Jack Fennell's *Irish Science Fiction*, and until 2018 until Fennell again produced the first significant

collection of classical Irish SF, *A Brilliant Void*. There, despite the brief, polite golf claps from the reviews pages of the *Irish Times*, it might have ended. Thankfully, we have Richard Howard to remind us that, as Irish SF proliferates into young-adult fiction, into Irish language fiction, into postcolonial fiction, and into readerships in Ireland and abroad, it is long past time for scholars to sit up and take notice.

His point of interjection is well chosen, firstly because he focuses on two Belfast writers, one from each of that divided city's communities, united by a love of SF. It is also an astute intervention in that White and Shaw straddle the lengthy era between the immediate post-war period and the end of the century. Examining their bodies of work allows Howard to speculate about post-war Ireland, postcolonial Ireland, Cold War Ireland, and about the fraught recent history of the Northern Irish state. Howard is also excellent in highlighting how, in works such as White's *Sector-General* series (1962–1999), set on a galactic hospital ship, or Shaw's *Orbitsville* trilogy (1975–1990), set on an alien Dyson sphere, their work is as good or better than the vast majority of their era.

His study is therefore intriguingly positioned, strategically facing back towards Irish Studies to inform that particular geopolitical discipline about an entire intersection, that with SF, which it has largely overlooked. Indeed, it strives strenuously at times to command consideration of Shaw and White into future (and futurist) discussions within Irish Studies. Yet it is also inevitably Janus-faced, seeking to restore Shaw and White to their rightful positions as key figures in mid- to late 20<sup>th</sup>-century SF. Fennell, after all, devoted a mere 20 pages to the two. Howard gives them a righteous 280, which they more than warrant.

*Space for Peace* is not without occasional challenges for the lay reader, and not only in relation to Irish history, the North-South and urban-rural divides therein, or the complexities of SF fandom and author identities generated across Belfast's sectarian divide. Jamesonian ideologemes and similar terminology deriving from intellectual heavyweights, such as Bruno Latour, Giorgio Agamben, Herbert Marcuse, and A. J. Greimas, occasionally bog down the narrative in places, and betray the book's origins as a highly rigorous doctoral thesis, as does the regular signposting. However, sometimes you need to get the big guns out to make your point.

This is an avowedly Marxist analysis throughout, engaging here with the work of Fredric Jameson on Utopia, there with György Lukács on the historical novel. It's no less relevant for that, and indeed there are plenty of moments where Howard departs from a narrow Marxist reading to either encompass Irish or postcolonial perspectives, or to gently query some Marxist SF approaches, those by Darko Suvin in particular.

Howard is especially excellent at navigating the complex waters of alienness, alterity, and hybridity expressed in both White and Shaw, as well as finding at times ingenious modes of mapping these back onto the Ulster milieu from which both emerged. The limitations of White's imagination in relation to depicting the otherness of alien species in his *Sector-General* novels have persisted in later, especially audiovisual SF, wherein extra-terrestrials located in the *Star Trek*, *Star Wars* or *Babylon-5* universes often present merely a cursory otherness, evoking superficial humanoid alterity, or the otherness of terrestrial animals, while otherwise embodying much the same emotional range, behaviours, and belief systems as humans.

In this context, Howard astutely highlights the sexual anxieties present in White's multi-species environment. White's Catholicism imbues his fiction with a somewhat puritan tang to contemporary tastes, especially with celibacy and monogamy often rigidly enforced. Therefore, the sexual desires evoked by his medic characters who must psychologically don the mentality of aliens in order to treat them becomes a dark and dangerous liminal space, akin, as Howard notes, to "miscegenation and bestiality" (200).

I am therefore personally chastened by Howard's reports of James White's early SF, in particular his debut novel *Second Ending* (1961) and his 1964 collection of stories *Deadly Litter*, which both predate the Second Vatican Council, wherein one may find a positive depiction of Catholicism otherwise unknown in the Anglophone SF of the era. His later 1988 story, "Sanctuary", in which an alien race and Catholic nuns experience a positive first contact, inverts the habitual SF trope of aliens encountering Catholic religious orders, which almost invariably results elsewhere in the demise of the aliens.

In the SF of Shaw and White, the Northern Irish civil war known colloquially as the Troubles walks hand in hand with the Cold War. The latter provides the background noise not only for their era in general, but also for their day-to-day work, since both were employed in Shorts Brothers, an aerospace firm based in Belfast that also constructed missiles for the British military. This, as Howard explains, underpins their mutual depictions of the value of nuclear deterrents ("a kind of realist utopian stance that points to the prospect of world annihilation as a catalyst for world peace" [35]), their attachment to conspiratorial narratives, and their nuanced visions of Utopias, which possess both repressive and redemptive modes.

White's pacifism was a wary one, circumscribed and delimited by a sceptical attitude towards idealism in general and activist causes in particular, perhaps again informed by his experience of the Troubles. Likewise, Howard shows that Shaw and White concur on the need for an overview approach, a mode of escaping localised concerns to obtain a global or even galactic perspective, but they usually do so in the spirit of incrementalism and individualism. The boundaries with the alien Other in their novels may be a permeable one, but the erosion is always temporary, subject to judgement, never permanent.

Howard carefully questions White's well-established pacifism, though, not only identifying the Christian and subversive flavours attached to it, but also highlighting numerous instances of ambiguity in relation to it. He reads White's standalone novel *Underkill* (1979), in which the protagonist comes to sympathise with an alien species engaged in terrorism in Ireland in order to bring about a utopian future, as a distinct question mark over White's pacifistic instincts, although there is of course the alternative possibility that White may have been subtly satirising the utopian motivations that drive all such terror campaigns, in Ireland or elsewhere.

As Howard notes, however, White consistently critiqued pacifism as a kind of ideal rather than achievable reality (239–52). White may simply be a realist about the limitations of pacifism in a universe in which violence and war exist. Alternatively, as Howard argues, pacifism for White is circumscribed by a pressing concern over how to address the "poisonous few" (233), a view itself undoubtedly informed by living through and writing during the civil-war environment of the Troubles. White's anxious positioning of Sector-General's Monitors on the boundary between police and military further suggests this.

For Howard, White's choice of genre – space opera – itself predicates a concern with the application of violence.

There are points one might choose to query, of course. When Howard writes of Shaw's protagonist Tavernor, in *The Palace of Eternity* (1969), referring to humanity as "hideous, pale-skinned mongers of true death" in the eyes of the alien Syccans, is this really Shaw projecting a "racially pure future for space colonisation" (179)? Might it not equally be Shaw somewhat bluntly projecting the physiology of terrestrial coloniality into the wider territory of galactic space? It would, after all, hardly be the first or only example of space opera iterating imperial or colonial discontents.

Shaw had a clear tendency towards transcendental utopian conglomerations, whether human, as with the colonisation of the Dyson sphere *Orbitsville*, or ineffably alien as with the Elder Race creators of *Orbitsville*, or somehow both, as with the "egon mass" depicted in *The Palace of Eternity*. His ability to elide human/alien, human/animal and other Otherings suggests that he may not have been as prone to defaulting to ethnocentricity in space as many other SF writers. Howard is extremely good in delineating the importance of Shaw's "third way" politics as it migrated from his Northern Irish daily life to his galactically located SF pages (143–48); therefore, this particular cavil ought not be overstated.

Howard ends his book with a somewhat unexpected change of pace, moving rapidly outwards from Shaw and White to make an impassioned plea for the discipline of Irish Studies to grasp the opportunities presented by Jack Fennell's work (and implicitly his own), and embrace the substantial, significant, and growing corpus of Irish SF. Amid this, his brief diversion to consider the work of Ian McDonald (273–76) as a Belfast SF writer in the tradition of Shaw and White as much as a purveyor of postcolonial SF is provocative, succinct, and entirely correct.

This makes his final call to arms all the more persuasive. For an island at the forefront of globalisation and high-tech industry to continue to ignore its own futurisms seems perplexingly obtuse. Howard points an accusatory finger at Irish academia in this regard, particularly at its somewhat hidebound understanding of canonicity.

But this reviewer might add a further admonition: Irish SF is simply too good to be ignored, and as SF Studies is currently experiencing a long overdue expansion of its remit to encompass previously ignored futurisms, surely Irish futurism must be one of them? Jack Fennell's earlier work was largely neglected not only by Irish Studies scholars but also by SF scholarship. I fervently hope Richard Howard's immensely important work will not be greeted with a similar shrug of the shoulders. Let us not forget Bob Shaw and James White a second time.

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