



**TROUBLES**  
**J. G. FARRELL**

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INTRODUCTION BY  
**JOHN BANVILLE**

## TROUBLES

J. G. FARRELL (1935–1979) was born with a caul, long considered a sign of good fortune. Academically and athletically gifted, Farrell grew up in England and Ireland. In 1956, during his first term at Oxford, he suffered what seemed a minor injury on the rugby pitch. Within days, however, he was diagnosed with polio, which nearly killed him and left him permanently weakened. Farrell's early novels, which include *The Lung* (1965) and *A Girl in the Head* (1967), have been overshadowed by his Empire Trilogy—*Troubles* (1970), the Booker Prize-winning *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), and *The Singapore Grip* (1978). *Troubles* was set into motion when he came upon a grand hotel destroyed by fire on Block Island, Rhode Island, in 1967: "Old bedsprings twisted with heat; puddles of molten glass; washbowls that had fallen through to the foundations; a flight of stone steps leading up to thin air; twisted pipes; lots of nails lying everywhere and a few charred beams." In early 1979, Farrell bought a farmhouse in Bantry Bay on the Irish coast. "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 . . . Then a colony of bees has come to live above my back door and I'm thinking of turning them into my feudal retainers." On August 11, Farrell was hit by a wave while fishing and was washed out to sea. His body was found a month later.

JOHN BANVILLE was born in Wexford, Ireland, in 1945. He is the author of twelve novels, including *The Book of Evidence*, which was short-listed for the 1989 Booker Prize, *The Untouchable*, and *Eclipse*.

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NEW YORK REVIEW BOOKS



*New York*

This is a New York Review Book  
Published by The New York Review of Books  
1755 Broadway, New York, NY 10019

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Farrell, J. G. (James Gordon), 1935-

Troubles / J. G. Farrell ; introduction by John Banville.

p. cm. — (New York Review Books classics)

ISBN 1-59017-018-0 (alk. paper)

1. Family-owned business enterprises—Fiction. 2. World War, 1914–1918—Veterans—Fiction. 3. Ireland—History—1910–1921—Fiction.
4. Hotels—Fiction. I. Title. II. Series.

PR6056.A75 T76 2002

823'.914—dc21

2002002988

ISBN 1-59017-018-0

Cover photograph: Anonymous, overturned hansom cab with spectators,  
Edwardian era

Cover design: Katy Homans

Book design by Lizzie Scott

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper.

1 0 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

October 2002

[www.nybooks.com](http://www.nybooks.com)

## INTRODUCTION

IN DEREK MAHON'S great poem *A Disused Shed in Co. Wexford*, a pair of travelers find themselves "Deep in the grounds of a burnt-out hotel, / Among the bathtubs and the washbasins"; forcing open a long-locked door, they come upon a host of mushrooms crowding in the darkness. They have been there, the poet imagines, for decades, waiting for the blessed light to break in upon their fetid, liminal world:

*"Save us, save us," they seem to say,  
"Let not the god abandon us  
Who have come so far in darkness and in pain.  
We too had our lives to live . . ."*

The poem is a threnody for disappeared worlds—"Lost people of Treblinka and Pompeii!"—especially, although it does not mention it directly, the world of the Anglo-Irish aristocracy. This hardy strain, which had endured for some eight centuries, came to its sudden withering in the Irish War of Independence, which ended with the treaty signed between the British government and Michael Collins's I.R.A. in 1922. Under the treaty Ireland was partitioned, with twenty-six southern counties becoming a Free State, and the six northern counties remaining under British sovereignty. The result was civil war.

Effectively the country had been portioned out between the Protestants of the North and the Catholics of the South. It seemed at the time, to the bellicose Collins no less than to

the British Prime Minister Lloyd George, the only possible solution to an insoluble problem. One of the results of partition was that in both the North and the South a religious minority was left to fend for itself as best it might among a more or less hostile majority. In the North, that fending continues to this day; in the South, the Protestants, some 5 percent of the population, largely withdrew from public life, a matter of bitter regret to many of the more perceptive among them, from W. B. Yeats—"We are no petty people!"—to Hubert Butler. Butler, an essayist of genius, never ceased to bemoan the loss to the life of Southern Ireland of that energy, intransigence, and often fierce radicalism which marked the Protestant tradition, especially in the North.

Mahon's poem is dedicated to his friend J. G. Farrell. Farrell was an elusive, intensely private man, something of an enigma not only to the reading public but to many of those who knew him well. His parentage was a mixture of Irish and English. He was born in Liverpool in 1935, and spent much of his youth in the Far East. In his first term at Oxford he was afflicted with polio, which left him with a partially disabled arm. Nevertheless he was extremely attractive—in looks he resembled, and indeed had something of the aloofly playful manner of, Marcel Duchamp—and had affairs with an impressive number of women, as Lavinia Greacen revealed in her 1999 biography. He wrote seven novels, the best-known of which are the three which comprise the so-called Empire Trilogy, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, *The Singapore Grip*, and *Troubles*.

In the spring of 1979, Farrell moved to Ireland, living in a cottage on a remote promontory in Bantry Bay. Four months later, in August, while fishing in stormy weather off rocks near the cottage, he was washed into the sea and drowned. His death at forty-four, a tragically early age, especially for a novelist, led to an inexplicable decline in his reputation. Had he lived, no doubt he would have done wonders,

but even in the relatively short span of his career he erected an enduring literary monument, the capstone of which is *Troubles*. Although *The Siege of Krishnapur* won the Booker Prize in 1973, *Troubles* is surely his masterpiece, and the book of his that is certain to endure.

The “Troubles” of the title is the euphemism which the Irish—peasant, merchant, or Protestant aristo—applied to the ragged, sporadic, but brutal war that began in 1919 between Sinn Fein/I.R.A. and the British army of occupation. In fact, that war might be said to have started three years earlier, with the abortive Easter Rising of 1916, which lasted a week and ended with the summary execution of fourteen of its leaders. The uprising had been deeply unpopular among the majority of the Irish people—legend has it that lady passers-by belabored with their umbrellas the rebel force as it entered to occupy the General Post Office in Dublin on that Easter Monday morning—and both the English and the Anglo-Irish regarded it as a stab in the back by an ungrateful rabblement at a time when thousands of young men, many of them Irish, were dying in the defense of liberty in the killing fields of France. However, the haste and brutality of the executions of the leaders of the Rising provoked a surge of resentment among the native population that would not be asuaged until British rule was ended, at least in the Twenty-Six Counties.

Although *Troubles*, first published in 1970, was set fifty years previously, it was unintentionally well-timed, and uncannily prescient. That year saw the onset in bloody earnest of a new round of Troubles which at last, it is to be hoped, are coming to an end. In 1970, as in 1920, battle was joined between two mutually uncomprehending tribes; now, it was between the Catholic and Protestant working classes of Northern Ireland, with the British army in the middle; then, between the Catholic peasantry and the Protestant Ascendancy, with a force of British irregulars, the Black and Tans,

supposedly set to keep the peace but in reality waging punitive retaliation against an elusive army of rebels.

In *Troubles*, Farrell catches with appalling accuracy the brutal yet peculiarly farcical nature of that war that was never quite a war. Nowhere in the book do we see a single live I.R.A. man; even when one of the central characters, Major Archer, is being buried up to his neck on a beach to await drowning by the incoming tide, the hands that dig the hole and place him in it are anonymous, and might from the description of their ministrations be in the act of saving him rather than attempting to murder him. When we do get a glimpse of a rebel, a dead one, it is in one of the novel's more gruesomely comic, closing scenes—the body of the young man has been laid out on a table in a gun room, where his executioner, Edward Spencer, lets his gaze wander around the trophies of wild animal heads on the paneled walls, and “for an instant the dreadful thought occurred to the Major that Edward had now gone completely insane and was looking for a place on the wall to mount the Sinn Feiner.”

Edward Spencer—a name that will have an allusive echo for anyone who knows the history of Elizabethan Ireland—is one of the great comic portraits in modern literature. He is the proprietor, if that is the word, of the Majestic Hotel, a crumbling pile somewhere on the coast of County Wexford. It is to the Majestic that the haunted war veteran Major Archer comes, with wan reluctance, to claim Edward's daughter Angela as his bride. But Angela will not be wed, and as the weeks become months, and the months years, the Major lingers, an only faintly more vivid ghost among the hotel's ghostly guests, ancient ladies, for the most part, who have taken up permanent residence under the tottering former magnificence of the Majestic, along with a steadily burgeoning pack of half-wild cats which roam the upper stories like the building's bad dreams. Meanwhile Edward's surviving daughters, the terrible twins Faith and Charity—another

wonderful, and curiously erotic, invention—are growing half-wild too, the staff and servants lurk like wood-sprites, the boy Pdraig is turning transvestite, and Murphy the major-domo is going quietly but dangerously mad.

This may all sound like the cod-Gothic of *Cold Comfort Farm* or the deliciously cruel absurdities of early Evelyn Waugh, but Farrell's vision and voice are unique, inimitable. If there are faint echoes here, they are the most finely harmonious: Elizabeth Bowen's masterpiece, *The Last September*, perhaps Henry Green's hypnotic *Loving*. The tone of *Troubles* throughout is one of vague, helpless desperation, while the wit is dry to the point of snapping. Since the bulk of the action is seen through the Major's war-damaged sensibility, there is an air of permanent, pallid bafflement before the mundane mysteries of Irish life.

Yet the book is horridly, irresistibly, achingly funny, even, or especially, when it is at its most violent, or most poignant. The Major's doomed love for Sarah, the dissatisfied daughter of a—Catholic—banker in the nearby town of Kilnalough is at once heartbreaking and comic. Farrell's touch is robust yet delicate, and always sure. In the midst of a masterly set piece describing a ball at the Majestic which is meant to be grand but turns out grisly, there is a fleeting moment of exquisite sorrow when Sarah, bored with the Major's mutely pleading presence at her side, drops her eyes to her glass: "She flicked it idly with her finger-nail and drew from it one thin, clear note of a painful beauty, over which the honeyed sighings of the violins on the platform had no dominion."

If *Troubles* is the expression of the end of a world, it is one of the most finely modulated and magically comic whimpers the reader is ever likely to catch.

—JOHN BANVILLE