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The Bold Sons of Erin

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Review

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Parry, Owen *The Bold Sons of Erin*. William Morrow, \$24.95 ISBN 6051390

Crime of Passion

Welsh detective at work

Owen Parry's fifth installment in the Abel Jones series has lost none of the energy and authenticity that characterize the earlier novels. Indeed, this novel comes closest to plucking the chords of Jones's inner being. He is led to question nearly everything he believes in, from his faith to his marriage.

The Bold Sons of Erin, as with the other books in this series, enters the bizarre, violent underworld of the Civil War with the mild-mannered Major Abel Jones, a literary anti-hero if there ever was one. He is Columbo-like in his pesky persistence, probing where others do not want to be probed. Small of stature, with a bad leg, and therefore consistently underestimated (to his advantage), Jones is an odd mix of a coldly efficient fighter and a humble Christian dismayed by the darkness in the human heart. As a detective, he has none of the bad-boy dash of the conventional fictional detective. Nor, apparently, does he possess any of the particular skills we expect in Sherlock Holmes. He is distressingly human and fallible, jumping to conclusions and making poor calls amidst the confusion of events. If he has any skills beyond his native toughness, it is his stubborn compulsion to do his duty and an optimism in the eventual triumph of the Right and the Union. He is priggish, parsimonious, and judgmental, yet we cannot help liking him. For all of Jones's intolerance for human folly and vanities, he is a humane soul who knows himself with refreshing clarity and modesty.

The novel takes us into the coal country of southeastern Pennsylvania—Schuylkill County, where Parry himself was raised. Pottsville, the abode of Jones and his family, is simmering with the tension of labor troubles between the recalcitrant Irish and the mine owners. Gen. Charles Stone, a former officer of the Tsar's army, and popular among radical

revolutionary-minded Europeans everywhere, comes into the area to recruit a new regiment from among the Irish. But he has scarcely begun when he is found savagely murdered. President Lincoln is worried, due to Stone's rank and his popularity, and he calls on his trouble-shooter Major Jones.

No one is talking—neither the Irish nor the wealthy power structure of mine owners and lawyers. An Irish miner named Daniel Boland (the son of a famous rebel hero of the '48 Rising back in old Erin) has confessed to the deed and then died immediately from cholera, or so Jones is told. As Jones digs beneath the crust of indifference in his investigation, he also digs beneath the hard November soil of Heckschersville's shantytown cemetery and finds the body of a young woman in Boland's reputed coffin. With two murders on his hands, his search takes him on a nightmarish journey through a landscape of humanity as scarred and tortured as the countryside pocked by mines: a local madame, a would-be Russian assassin, a leprous German witch-woman in the woods, a half-cracked revolutionary Baroness who hides in an asylum, sullen Irish miners, a dandy of a Russian ambassador, a strange and aloof Catholic priest who engages in self-flagellation and scorn of the miner folk he serves—and a wild, feral woman with white skin and black hair and strange ways named Mary Boland, a breath-taking beauty, the wife of the mysteriously absent Daniel Boland. Claiming to be a witch, she lives in the wild, flaunts her sexuality, and threatens Jones with the "old words" of druidical magic. He also learns of a Kathleen Boland, sister to Daniel Band how she has been missing for some time.

In the midst of this frustrating task, personal troubles distract him. For the first time in the series, we have in-depth development of Mary Myfanwy Jones's character, beyond that of a loving and nurturing wife. She has started her own dress-making business, and shows an independent and clear-eyed side of herself not seen before Bnot even to her husband Abel Jones, who is taken aback by his wife's new boldness. She reproves Jones for his lack of tolerance and patience with others' foibles.

Parry has a lyrical power, through Jones's Welsh idiom, that does not obtrude itself, but occasionally flashes out in memorable ways, as in this description of the coal country landscape: The rain pressed down the evergreen boughs and bent the birches where the miners had ripped the earth. The sky grumbled. A wind made every drop of wet a lash. . . . and when a gale blew through the gashes the miners had left on the hillside, it seemed to draw a howl of pain from the stone. Twas a broken, bitter place, all ruination, each dig

abandoned once the coal was gone.

As Jones ponders the smoke and clamor of the mines, mills, and foundries, he reflects: "Our age is harsh, with the quality of metal, and I wonder if there will be beauty left for our children." Considering the mysteries of love, Jones offers this: Mr. Shakespeare saw the frailty of love, as surely as he understood love's awesome power. . . . That terrible Moor would rather believe a liar than his darling, the lord of fair Sicilia condemns his flawless queen. Yet, Macbeth loves his wife to the bloody end, despite her many deficiencies of character. Even Cleopatra, fickle and tawny, loved more deeply than she knew herself.

In an effort to re-assert his will to believe in a better world, Jones argues, "Well, we must have faith and go through. There is no end of reasons to doubt the Lord's wisdom. We must pray past our errors. It is a terrible vanity to argue with God. We must pray and have faith, and go through." This hope may be his most appealing feature.

There is a rich interweaving of war issues: secret Irish labor brotherhoods, foreign espionage, capitalism, and logistics, all part of the grim fabric of the Civil War. The combat portion of the War, as usual in the Jones series, is peripheral to the story, although the central issues of immigrant recruiting, racism, labor unrest on the homefront are central to the plot. And there is a magnificently rendered description of the attack on Marye's Heights in the final chapters of the novel as Abel Jones and his loquacious sidekick Jimmy Molloy watch the Irish Brigade surge up the slope with futile elan. Not until then, when they find Daniel Boland secreted within the ranks of the Fighting 69th New York, do they fully understand who killed General Stone, who wanted him dead, and why Daniel Boland had falsely confessed to the deed.

Owen Parry is the pen name for renaissance man and former Army lieutenant colonel Ralph Peters, a rather Jonesian character himself, with a varied background as combat soldier, "military intellectual" (as one article puts it), author, strategic theorist, and intelligence analyst, whose work has taken him to 50 countries. Descended himself from Welsh coal miners in Schuylkill County, he retired young in recent years to write full time.

Steeped in sexual obsession, murder, political intrigue, moral hypocrisy, and an eerie underworld of folk superstition, necrophilia, witchcraft, cannibalism, and incest, **Bold Sons of Erin** is disturbing. At times, the reader's credulity is

stretched, considering the plausibility of the rather bizarre world which Abel Jones inhabits. But Parry makes us believe in it, which makes the unlikely but plausible world he has created all the more unsettling.

Randal Allred is associate professor of English at Brigham Young University Hawaii, where he also directs the Honors Program. He is currently writing a book on Civil War literature and is beginning another on battle reenactments.