

# Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

**Starkie, Walter Fitzwilliam** (1894–1976), *Hispanic scholar and travel writer*

by James Whiston

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**Starkie, Walter Fitzwilliam** (1894–1976), Hispanic scholar and travel writer, was born on 9 August 1894 at Harrow House, Ballybrack, Killiney, co. Dublin, the only surviving son (a brother died in infancy) among the six children of William Joseph Myles Starkie (1860–1920), classicist, from Roscarbery, co. Cork, a fellow of Trinity College, Dublin, and last resident commissioner of national education in Ireland, and his wife, May Caroline, *née* Walsh, from Dublin. Enid Mary Starkie (1897–1970), French scholar, was his nearest sibling in age. Following his father, Starkie went to Shrewsbury School, and thence to Trinity College, Dublin. He was a consummate violin player, and won a gold medal in the Dublin music festival of 1913. Indeed, it could be said that his virtuosity as a violinist is the key to his life and to his reputation as a travel writer, to which his *Spain: a Musician's Journey through Time and Space* (1958) is ample testament.

Although he later wrote in his autobiography *Scholars and Gypsies* (1963) that his father was concerned about the negative impact on his academic progress of his time spent playing the violin, Starkie excelled in his studies at Trinity College. He was elected to a college scholarship in 1915, gained a first-class moderatorship and gold medal in classics in 1917, was appointed to a lectureship in Romance languages in 1920 and to a college fellowship four years later, and was made a LittD in 1926. In that same year he was appointed professor of Spanish at Trinity, as well as retaining a lectureship in Italian. He numbered Samuel Beckett among his students, but neither man found much to enthuse about in the other's work. The establishment of the King Alfonso XIII chair of Spanish studies at Oxford was announced in 1927, and the new post may have attracted Starkie because it brought a separate lectureship in Spanish in its wake, and hence would allow more time for the professor to travel abroad, but Starkie was convinced that the chair could not be his because he was a Catholic. Since a Spaniard, Salvador de Madariaga, became the chair's first incumbent, other reasons may have prevailed. Starkie became a member of the Royal Irish Academy in 1930.

Starkie had volunteered for service in the First World War in 1914, but was rejected because of chronic asthma. He was finally successful in enlisting with the Young Men's Christian Association in 1917 to do humanitarian work in Italy. There he met the opera singer (Italia) Augusta Porchietti, daughter of Alberto Porchietti of Genoa. They married in 1921 and had two children, Alma and Landi. It was in Italy that he was taken with the idea of travelling with his violin in central Europe, a dream not fulfilled until 1929, and which gave rise to *Raggle Taggle* (1933). *The Waveless Plain: an Italian Autobiography* followed in 1938. These works were as much loose autobiographies, laced with political and historical commentaries, as travel books in the strict sense. His travel adventures in Spain were recorded in *Spanish Raggle-Taggle* (1934) and *The Road to Santiago* (1957), for northern

Spain, and *Don Gypsy* (1936), for central and southern Spain. He met Federico García Lorca in Madrid's *residencia de estudiantes* and played a duo for piano and violin with the great poet and dramatist.

In 1927 Starkie became a member of the board of the Abbey Theatre, joining W. B. Yeats, Lady Gregory, and Lennox Robinson as the fourth member of that élite group. Yeats valued him for his classical scholarship; it helped the ecumenical balance of the board (which recently had received its first Irish free state subvention) that Starkie was a Catholic; and Lady Gregory reckoned that he would be a 'compliant' colleague. Nonetheless, Starkie was the only one of the board who voted in favour of producing Sean O'Casey's expressionist *The Silver Tassie* in 1927. His place as a footnote to Irish theatrical history may, however, arise from another rejection by the board in 1928, that of Denis Johnston's modernist play *The Old Lady Says 'NO'!*, originally entitled *Shadowdance*. Starkie was evidently charged with giving Johnston the bad news, and he wrote in his spindly handwriting on the draft title-page the five words (referring to Lady Gregory) that Johnston then used to retitle the play before putting it on at Dublin's Gate Theatre, to considerable critical acclaim.

Starkie's tenure on the Abbey board ended in 1942, but already in 1940 he had received extended leave of absence from Trinity to go to Spain to found the British Institute and the British Council School in Madrid, both towards the end of that year. In the 1920s he had interviewed Mussolini, Giovanni Gentile, and Edmondo Rossoni, 'the great authority on the Corporative State' (*Waveless Plain*, 405), the latter complete with black shirt; he had engaged in some kind of dialogue with Josef Goebbels, and was a founding member of the Centre International des Études Fascistes, a right-wing, sometimes far-right, international grouping based in Lausanne. This pedigree and his Irish nationality would have smoothed the path into Franco's war-time Spain, where suspicion of perfidious Albion was naturally running high among the Germanophiles of the dictator's cabinet. Nevertheless Starkie was Churchill's man, not Franco's, sharing cigars when in London with the prime minister during the war. In 1986 *El País* referred to Starkie as 'a member of the espionage service of his country', much to the indignation of his daughter Alma, who wrote a letter of complaint to the newspaper. His CBE and CMG came in 1948 and 1954 respectively. Apart from the day-to-day running of the institute Starkie's task was to gauge the extent of Franco's sway as a popular leader. His bon viveur, friendly personality, encased in a voluminous frame, and his obviously aesthetic demeanour would have made him seem harmless enough to the ideologues with whom he came into contact. Under Starkie's aegis the 'British', as the council was known to the inhabitants of Madrid who used it later in the 1940s, became a kind of club, a haven for those non-conformists, like the future Nobel laureate Camilo José Cela, who wished to savour the easy-going, party (in the festive sense) style of the place, and its reminder of less grim and gloomy cultural climes in post-war western Europe. As Starkie said of his own 'fiddling' prowess: 'the minstrel is a pariah; he belongs to no party ... but he possesses the gift of freedom, and he can win his way through the world by his wizardry' (*Waveless Plain*, 12). Thus began a long formal association with Spain that lasted until his retirement in 1955; he relinquished his Trinity chair and fellowship in 1947 (later to have adverse economic consequences,

because of the loss of a proper pension). From 1947 to 1956 he held a lectureship in comparative literature in the University of Madrid, and also had time to give lectures in several universities in the United States. He went in 1961 as visiting professor to the University of California, Los Angeles, where he remained until 1970. He returned to Madrid for the last six years of his life.

Already well known as a translator, Starkie attempted to scale the summit of Spain's greatest work, *Don Quixote*, producing an abridged English version in 1954 and the full work in 1964, subsequently gaining access to a worldwide market by having the translation published in the popular Signet Classics series. In 1974 the board of Trinity College, Dublin, having regard to his financial situation, assigned Starkie a visiting professorship for a term. Although still vigorous, he was in his eightieth year, and the more exam-oriented students of the time found hearing his lectures on modern Spain a mystifying experience. On returning to Dublin in 1975 he was hospitalized after an asthma attack on the night of a very successful lecture at the Royal Dublin Society. His 'nemesis', as he termed it, came to claim his life in Madrid on 2 November 1976. His wife died six months later. They were both buried in the British cemetery, Madrid.

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### Archives

TCD, papers | BL, Society of Authors archive · Royal Society of Literature, Somerset House · TCD, Denis Johnston papers

### SOUND

BL NSA, documentary and performance recordings

### Likenesses

D. Vázquez Díz, oils, Museo de Bellas Artes de Bilbao; repro. in Solís, *Memorial* · bust, priv. coll.; repro. in Solís, *Memorial* · photographs, repro. in Solís, *Memorial* · photographs, repro. in [www.enclaverevista.com/libros/articulo.php?id\\_articulo=1852](http://www.enclaverevista.com/libros/articulo.php?id_articulo=1852)

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