

ACIS Newsletter

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ACIS Meeting at Marquette: 1969

The Executive and your editor extend their thanks for a well organized and pleasantly varied meeting at Marquette University this spring past. Larry McCaffrey is to be congratulated for the very efficient manner in which all was organized. At the general meeting which followed Friday's papers, it was announced that Southern Illinois University at Carbondale would be next year's host. Details of that meeting will be announced in forthcoming issues of this Newsletter.

Travel: Ireland

Those of you who may not have been able to meet schedules of the Irish American Cultural Institute flights may be able still to find a suitable timetable by contacting the Synnott Travel Bureau, 415 Lexington Avenue, New York 17, New York, c/o Brian Callander. The Synnott Bureau deals with much of the Irish-American air travel; in the past it has had generous discounts on regularly scheduled flights leaving the New York area in the summer months.

The Honest Ulsterman

The New University of Ulster is the base for the monthly journal noted in the caption. This "Monthly Handbook for a Revelation" (as the subtitle reads) contains essays, poems, and manifestoes from young writers on both sides of the border. Among those appearing in recent issues have been John Montague, Brendan Kennelly, and Seamus Heaney - to note but a few. The Honest Ulsterman appeared last May, and it is an indication of the new spirit abroad in Ulster. Mr. James Simmons, a lecturer at the School of English at the New University, is editor of the journal. The price per issue is 60¢; all communications should be addressed to Editor, The Honest Ulsterman, 15 Kerr Street, Portrush, Co. Antrim, N. Ireland.

Ph.D. in Irish History

By this printing Larry McCaffrey should be well established at the University of Maine. As Chairman of the History Department, he is initiating a doctoral program in Irish History for the period 1800-1922. This will be part of the Briton-Commonwealth program now in existence. Anyone interested in further

available on this subject. The book also can be highly recommended to anyone seeking a better understanding of the problems which continue to inhibit Ulster today.

Thomas E. Hachey
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Edd Winfield Parks and Aileen Wells Parks. Thomas MacDonagh: The Man, The Patriot, The Writer. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1967.

Thomas MacDonagh has become almost inextricably combined with Padraic Pearse and Joseph Mary Plunkett as the literary triumvirate who lent dramatic flair to the Easter Rising of 1916. Now, when the notion of "blood sacrifice" is so popular with historians and literary critics, it is felt by many that somehow the literary propensities of these men were key ingredients, if not in bringing about the Rising directly, at least in partially explaining how otherwise intelligent men might get involved in what with retrospect seems so hopeless a task -- the overthrow of seven hundred years of British rule by less than a thousand ill-equipped Irish Volunteers and Citizen Army men. There has been a tendency among scholars and commentators to look first at the fact of the Rising, then to examine the lives and works of these men, and finally to conclude that the Rising, or something like it, was always in their minds from the time they first set pen to paper. The Easter Rising, it is felt, is a grand idealistic act; it would seem to follow, then, that it is the culmination of the ideals of those men who planned and took part in it. Clearly, it is time to take a much more discerning look at MacDonagh, Pearse, and Plunkett, to separate them and give individuality to their lives: in short, to ignore the emotional and limiting perspective of the event of Easter Week.

The biographical approach towards these men which has prevailed up to the present is perhaps best summed up in the attitude Louis Le Roux assumes in the Preface to his study of the life of Pearse (Patrick H. Pearse, Dublin, 1932): "Pearse was more than a patriot; he was a virtuous man. He possessed all the qualities which go to the making of a saint to a degree that it is hardly within my province to analyse." This statement is typical of the mental block which paralyzes many of those who write biographies of patriots. It is true that the block will clear in time, and it is also true that there will eventually be a Lytton Strachey phase of denigrating biographies about the 1916 leaders. Indeed, to one working in this period a book like Sean O'Casey's Drums under the Windows -- for all its bias and eccentricity -- has a ring of truth about it, if for no other reason that it shows something of the ordinary and the ridiculous which must have been present even in the life of Le Roux's virtuous and saintly Pearse.

Thomas MacDonagh has over the years come to be known as Pearse's "helper." True to the formula of 1916 patriotic biography, like Pearse he was influenced by the Gaelic League and no doubt by Arthur Griffith's "Resurrection of Hungary" articles in the United Irishman of 1904. He "helped" Pearse at St. Enda's, in the Irish Volunteers, at the Howth gun-running, at the O'Donovan Rossa funeral -- perhaps he was involved in the "kidnapping" of James Connolly -- and, of course, before and during the Easter Rising. Biographers seem to find in his light-heartedness and humor a convenient contrast or relief from the rather more serious Pearse. Not so important as Pearse, not so well-known, his presence was noted at events, his exact contribution always seemed vague, though it was invariably summed up as "helping" Pearse. But what more is there to the man than

simply the picture of the devoted lieutenant?

MacDonagh was born in Cloughjordan, County Tipperary, in 1878. He was educated at Rockwell College by the Holy Ghost Fathers and was for a time a member of that order. He left Rockwell and the order to teach in Kilkenny for two years. While in Kilkenny he was very active in Gaelic League affairs, but subsequently left in 1903 and taught at St. Colman's, Fermoy, for five years. After a two year stint with Pearse at St. Enda's, he completed his B.A. and M.A. at University College, Dublin, and then joined the faculty of that institution for the remainder of his life. His publications include six volumes of verse -- Through the Ivory Gate (1902), April and May (1903), The Golden Joy (1906), Songs of Myself (1910), Lyrical Poems (1913), and the posthumous Collected Poems (1916); three plays -- When the Dawn is Come (1908), Metempsychosis (1912), and Pagans (produced in 1915 but not published until 1920); and two books of criticism -- Thomas Campion and the Art of Poetry (1913) and Literature in Ireland (1916).

Most people know only Literature in Ireland and the Collected Poems, and the rest of MacDonagh's work has been largely neglected. Biographically this is unfortunate because the other works represent stepping stones toward artistic maturity. They also show an individual who tended to embrace movements and ideas only to be disillusioned with them after the initial excitement palled. MacDonagh was at various times disillusioned with the priesthood, the Gaelic League, Ireland, a number of different friends, and life in general. These disillusionments are reflected primarily in his poetry and until now critics have been content to examine them only as they might or might not relate to Irish nationalism. An example of this kind of interpretation can be seen in the otherwise very interesting book by Richard Loftus, Nationalism in Modern Anglo-Irish Poetry (pp. 157-158), where, contrary to what Mr. Loftus thinks, MacDonagh's poem "Envoi" is not about his turning toward "militant nationalism" but is instead about a movement away from a disappointed love affair and a prospective journey to Paris to get away from the setting of that affair.

The biography by Professor and Mrs. Parks represents the first scholarly attempt at examining Thomas MacDonagh's life. Unfortunately, their book is much too narrowly conceived to be of much help to people interested in either MacDonagh or the Anglo-Irish literary revival. It is cast in the mold of previous 1916 biographies. In fact, just as Le Roux in 1932 decided to approach Pearse from several different subject aspects, so too the Parks have divided MacDonagh into five men: man, patriot, poet, dramatist, and critic. Predictably, the result is five different essays from which a portrait of one individual man does not emerge. Each of these aspects of MacDonagh's life tends to exist in a vacuum; the only attempt at unity is the theme, thrown in helter-skelter, of patriotism.

Le Roux justified his approach by denigrating chronology. "If I had proceeded thus, my task would have been easy." One wonders if it would have. A subject approach seems to me the easier way out of the problem. Nothing has to fit together and one may exclude what one likes by a judicious choice of matter to be treated. The Parks do not justify (in word or deed) their subject approach, but they do say,

We have tried to make this a personal biography. As far as possible, MacDonagh tells his own story through his letters, his notebooks, his poems, and his articles. This is not a literary history of the period:

we have treated the lives and works of other writers only when they touched upon MacDonagh's. Neither is it in any sense a Life and Times. MacDonagh was active in several movements and we have necessarily dealt with them, but the primary emphasis has been on MacDonagh's part rather than the movement itself.

Like Le Roux, they have begged the question with respect to many of the biographer's responsibilities.

The main source material for this biography is a group of letters from Thomas MacDonagh to Dominick Hackett whom MacDonagh knew in Kilkenny while teaching at St. Kieran's College. Hackett emigrated to New York, probably in 1903, and their correspondence, beginning then, lasted right up to MacDonagh's death. The Parks quote lengthy extracts of these letters to Hackett and in fact make them the basis of the narrative of the first chapter of their book. These extracts are presented with little or no insight and are made to carry more than their share of the burden of the biographer's task. The main fault with relying on the letters as a basis for narrative, however, is the failure of the biographers to examine them critically. MacDonagh makes many plans in the letters, announces projects completed, and talks about his role in various activities. The Parks let all of these details stand as fact. For example, in a letter to Hackett of November 1911 (p. 28), MacDonagh announces that he is going to collaborate with William O'Brien-Butler "in writing a 'Tain Ring,' three operas on Deirdre and Maev. . . ." The Parks have no comment on this project, either the plan of it or any possible results of it (it seems never to have been started, let alone completed). In itself, perhaps, the answer to what happened to the "Tain" cycle is minor, but the implication it poses is major, namely MacDonagh's tendency toward new schemes, new outlets, new pre-occupations.

Unfortunately, the Parks evidently never saw any of Hackett's letters to MacDonagh. If they had, they would have seen that Hackett himself also tended to move from project to project in an effort to make a life in his adopted country. Both men seemed, a least subconsciously, to want to impress each other with how well things were going. In a larger sense, however, MacDonagh the plan-maker, as his letters show him to be, revealed a trait that pervaded all his work. The MacDonagh manuscripts in the National Library of Ireland are replete with title pages for future books, many of which never appeared. Sometimes even there are a number of title pages -- each neatly spaced and dated -- bearing the same date, with merely slight alterations in the appended tables of contents. It is obvious that MacDonagh derived great satisfaction from this activity. Yet since much of his poetry is very gloomy, there would seem to be a disparity between the spirit with which he planned a work and his state of mind while actually writing the poems. Perhaps Max Caulfield is right in his book, The Easter Rising (p. 43), that "psychological jargon today might classify him a manic-depressive." In any case, MacDonagh's letters to Hackett call for interpretation and a careful checking of detail, neither of which the Parks supply.

There are errors too in this first chapter of the Parks' biography which suggest they were not as well acquainted with their subject matter as they might have been. MacDonagh is stated (p. 6) to have gone on teaching at Rockwell College for two years after the date of his withdrawal from the Holy Ghost order in 1901. In

fact, he left Rockwell completely that year. Moreover, the method of dating throughout this first chapter is extremely confusing. One is frequently not sure of the year in which an event took place, and the Hackett letters themselves are only occasionally specifically dated. Failure on the part of the biographers to examine the historical background more closely results in their moving St. Enda's to Rathfarnham in 1909 (actually 1910) and in confusing the "Bloody Sunday" baton charge of 21 August 1913 with an event which happened in October 1913. Finally, the documentation of this first chapter is inadequate.

Chapter Two, "The Patriot," is purely the old formula of 1916 patriotic biography -- the Dublin general strike, the founding of the Irish Volunteers, Howth, the Rossa funeral, Connolly's kidnapping, and the Rising. It adds nothing new. In addition, it ignores several issues, some of which imply that the Parkses did not want to say anything they thought unflattering to MacDonagh. On the question of admitting the Redmondite nominees to the Provisional Committee of the Irish Volunteers in June 1914, the Parkses do not admit that MacDonagh probably voted in favor of that step being taken. To have voted against this proposal, of course, is to have been on the side of the angels. In still another case (pp. 33-34), the Parkses report on the situation in June 1913 which led to Plunkett's replacing Padraic Colum as editor of the Irish Review. The biographers quote part of a letter from David Houston to MacDonagh in which Houston details Colum's feelings about Plunkett's takeover of the Review. Significantly, the extent of Colum's resentment toward MacDonagh, which was considerable, is left out of the extract of the letter which the Parkses have included. Of the future course of the Irish Review under Plunkett and MacDonagh we are left with only this blithe summation: "MacDonagh continued to work closely with Plunkett in getting out the Review."

The remaining chapters are really critical essays, each devoted to a genre of MacDonagh's work, and here the Parkses are on much safer ground than in the purely biographical sections of the book. The essays suffer, however, from the fact that the critical method in them is synopsis. We are told the major themes of each of MacDonagh's books of poetry; we are given lengthy plot summations of the plays; and the critical dicta of both Campion and Literature in Ireland are enumerated. Beyond relatively safe general judgements the essayists do not venture.

There can be little value to such summary criticism. Perhaps if MacDonagh were a major literary figure and this book was a paperback designed for undergraduates, one could justify its existence. But to stand as a biography this book is misleading. Anyone truly interested in MacDonagh should read MacDonagh. If one is motivated enough to buy a biography of MacDonagh, one reason presumably is for the elaboration it might give on the makeup or background of individual works. And such a work as Literature in Ireland, for example, cries out for such examination. The Parkses do admit that it is made up of lectures and articles MacDonagh had composed previously. But the manuscripts in the National Library tell a story of piecemeal composition which explains why Literature in Ireland is frequently confusing and difficult to follow. Chapter VIII of Literature in Ireland, as a case in point, entitled "Irish Literature," is in its first twenty pages a pastiche of articles from An Macaom, 1909 and 1913, and the Irish Review issues of April and May of 1911. MacDonagh quite literally glued together part of this chapter with little regard to transition and continuity.

More important is the dating of Literature in Ireland and MacDonagh's original plans for the book. MacDonagh originally contracted for the book -- a much larger

and more ambitious critical study of nineteenth century Anglo-Irish authors, complete with biographical sketches -- in the summer of 1913, but by January of 1914 he had done little work on it and had changed his mind on its makeup. There is evidence among the manuscripts that the bulk of the work was done in 1914 and MacDonagh himself says in a Hackett letter of May 1915 that he had finished it, yet the Parkses (p. 116) say it was finished in January 1916. The importance of dating cannot be overestimated, since it becomes clear that Volunteer activity, especially from the end of 1914 to the Rising, prevented MacDonagh from turning out the book he originally had in mind. It thus explains many of the shortcomings of the book and also shows, I believe, that nationalist activity and literary activity did not mix as readily as many would believe.

Still further with Literature in Ireland, we would expect from a biography of MacDonagh some studies which trace the ideas present in the book. The "proper role" of Anglo-Irish literature in the new Ireland was a question much discussed in those days. The ideas of William Rooney and Alice Stopford Green, to name just two influential commentators, bear looking at on this question.

The Parkses' summaries of MacDonagh's poetry and drama are accurate enough, though generalized, but their main shortcoming here is a tendency to find nationalism and the Rising behind every metaphor. Of the undeniably nationalist poem "To Ireland" (April and May, 1903), they comment: "It is MacDonagh's first hint that there must be a mystical blood-sacrifice before the regeneration of Ireland can be achieved..." (p. 80). This is far too early a poem for it to fit into the context of the Easter Rising. About the plays, the Parkses' last word is this: (p. 115) "He MacDonagh welded these elements together in dramas that expressed his hopes and his desires for a free Ireland." Since MacDonagh's mature dramatic work represents him at his most dispassionate (Pagans and Metempsychosis), it is difficult to see how the Parkses can make this statement.

To conclude, this biography is not a good one. Its conception is far too narrow. One feels the authors have lumped together everything they could conveniently find, in case-book fashion. Moreover, its critical apparatus is very deficient, its judgements are shallow, and its only success is a compartmentalizing of a man to such an extent that he and his work seem to exist in limbo. His ideas are not evaluated or placed in any perspective, his friends exist as names, and his life seems a cliché -- a good man devoted to his country.

It need not be such. It seems to me that there was another climax than the Rising to Thomas MacDonagh's life -- that of the publication of Lyrical Poems in 1913. This volume appeared after the only two years of MacDonagh's maturity which were unfettered by political activity -- the years of the literary evenings at Grange House Lodge, the years of his scholarly work on Campion, the years of his courtship and marriage, the years of his editorial work on the Irish Review. In itself Lyrical Poems is a beautifully produced book and it contains his best poems, including some telling revisions of earlier work. Almost simultaneous with its publication began the political activity inspired by the general strike, the founding of the Volunteers, the agitation in Ulster, and the Home Rule bill. After Lyrical Poems appeared MacDonagh turned his efforts toward nationalism and political activity, and this activity supplanted his literary work -- as is evidenced by the fact that he wrote very little after the fall of 1914. With MacDonagh, at least, it is simply not relevant to discuss the Easter Rising in the same breath as his literary efforts.

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