

Clarke, Austin

by Maurice Harmon

Clarke, Austin (1896–1974), poet, novelist, and verse dramatist, was born 9 May 1896 at 83 Manor Street, Dublin, the only surviving boy among twelve children, of which three girls also survived. His father, Augustine Clarke (d. 2 November 1918), an official in Dublin corporation, became superintendent of the waste-water department. His mother was Ellen Patten Browne (d. 17 March 1944). In 1899 the family moved to 15 Mountjoy Street, near the Black Church (St Mary's chapel of ease). Austin was educated at Belvedere College (1905–12), but spent one term at Mungret College, Co. Limerick. He was then a student at UCD (1912–16; BA in English language and literature, 1915; MA, 1916). In 1917 he was appointed assistant lecturer in English to replace Thomas MacDonagh (qv), who had been executed for his part in the Easter rising.

Shortly after the death of his father, on 17 March 1919 Clarke entered St Patrick's Hospital to receive treatment for melancholia. His unconsummated marriage to Lia Cummins ended within a few days. When he lost his position at UCD, reputedly because he had married in a registry office, he went to England, where he earned his living as a reviewer. He returned frequently but stayed abroad to escape his mother's domination. Clarke was greatly influenced by the Irish literary revival, particularly by the early poetry of W. B. Yeats (qv) and his and other plays at the Abbey Theatre. He came into contact with many of the leading figures: Douglas Hyde (qv), one of his teachers at UCD; AE (George Russell (qv)), who encouraged him; Stephen MacKenna (qv), who arranged for the publication of his first poem; and F. R. Higgins (qv), who showed him the possibilities of imitating Irish poetry. All his early work, musical lyrics and epic narratives based on medieval and Celtic material, was affected by the romantic style of the revival. In 1928 he won the national award for poetry at the Tailteann games. *Pilgrimage* (1929), the high point of his exploration of the Christian medieval past, which he called the Hiberno-romanesque, was distinguished by the use of assonantal patterns as in Irish poetry and by the portrayal of repressive clerical teaching about sexuality. Within the broad compass of poems, three prose romances, and verse plays, Clarke drew extensively on this period, delighting in its artistic achievements in metal, stone, and manuscript. The central question for him was the conflict between individual liberty and ecclesiastic prohibition. That sexual desire should be rigorously denounced was the paradox at the heart of his imaginative and moral life.

In 1930 Clarke went to England with Nora Walker; they lived together and had three sons, Donald, Aidan, and Dardis, and eventually married in 1945. *Collected poems* (1936) included a portrait of Clarke by Estella Solomons. *Night and morning* (1938) was a collection of religious lyrics that dramatised the strains of the catholic conscience. In this unique collection Clarke faced up to an issue for which he

could find no solution: he wanted to belong to the catholic church, to share in the communion of the faithful, but was driven into conflict with its morality by virtue of his natural desires and into rebellion against its teaching by his need for intellectual inquiry. No longer cloaking the issue in historical figures or in a former culture, he drew from deep within his own perplexities. The fact that he used the language and imagery of the church – its sacraments, its theological arguments, its own history of debate – gave the poetry authenticity; its compressed style reflected the tension it illuminated. *The singing men at Cashel* (1936), set in medieval Ireland, was an extended treatment of the conflict between rigid catholicism and individual freedom.

In 1937 the Clarkes returned to live permanently at Bridge House, Templeogue. Austin continued to write reviews for London newspapers until the outbreak of the Second World War. Then he reviewed for the *Irish Times* and broadcast programmes for Radio Éireann; he also held literary evenings at Bridge House. He received the Casement award for poetry and drama from the Irish Academy of Letters and was president of Irish PEN from 1939 to 1942. Together with Roibeard Ó Faracháin (qv) he founded the Dublin Verse-Speaking Society in 1939, and he accepted nomination to the Irish Academy of Letters. In 1944 he and Ó Faracháin founded the Lyric Theatre Company, which put on performances of verse drama at the Abbey Theatre until fire destroyed the theatre in 1951 (when the Lyric moved to the RIAM theatre). Their aim was to revive the tradition of verse-drama that W. B. Yeats had initiated at the Abbey Theatre. Clarke's interest in theatre persisted and at one stage, 1938–53, was his main literary activity. His plays also focus on the drama of conscience and are of two kinds: comedies that represent a side of his personality that appears elsewhere only occasionally and less effective serious plays. His *Collected plays* appeared in 1963. In 1943 he began to publish his own work in limited editions from the Bridge Press. He was president of Irish PEN (1946–9), chairman of the Dublin Verse-Speaking Society (1946–9), and president of the Irish Academy of Letters (1952–4).

In 1955 Bridge Press published *Ancient lights: poems and satires*, Clarke's first book of poems since 1938. It marked a new phase in his work of engagement with social and political issues in Ireland. In 1956 he had a serious heart attack and was ordered to rest, and in 1958 he suffered another, mild, heart attack. *Later poems* (Dolmen Press, 1961) established his position more widely, and in these years he emerged as a poet of considerable power. He wrote two kinds of poems: short lyrics and satires about contemporary issues and long autobiographical poems that tell us what it was like to grow up in twentieth-century Ireland. He knew what it was like to feel alienated, to be at odds with society and the church; he knew the pain of isolation and empathised with outcasts and misfits. Some of the autobiographical poems move with great verbal and rhythmic energy. As always Clarke is a master of verse forms. *Twice round the Black Church*, an autobiography, was published in 1962 and the volume *Collected plays* in 1963. *First flight to Africa* (1964) won the Denis Devlin memorial award for poetry from the Irish arts council.

Clarke accepted an invitation to lecture at UCD in 1965 and received an honorary D.Litt. degree from TCD in 1966. In this year also he attended the PEN congress in New York. *Mnemosyne lay in dust*, published on his seventieth birthday, was a major re-creation of the horrors of being a patient in St Patrick's Hospital. In 1967 he delivered a lecture on 'The poetry of Swift' from the pulpit in St Patrick's cathedral, as part of the Swift tercentenary commemoration, and revisited St Patrick's Hospital, delighted by changes in the treatment of patients. The more joyous side of Clarke's temperament, visible in early lyrics, re-emerged in final poems drawn from classical and Celtic mythology. *The sun dances at Easter*, a prose romance (1952), was a light-hearted work. In 1972 Clarke received the American Irish Foundation's literary award. He died on 19 March 1974 before he could read the proofs of his *Collected poems, 1917–1974*. Two portraits by Estella Solomons (qv) are in TCD, and a sculptured head by Marjorie Fitzgibbon was bought by the RDS and displayed in their library. Some of his papers are at the University of Texas, Austin. Other papers are at the NLI (MS collection list 83).

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Maurice Harmon, *Austin Clarke 1896–1974* (1989); Gregory A. Schirmer, *Reviews and essays by Austin Clarke* (1994); personal knowledge