

O'Farrelly, Agnes Winifred

by Marie Coleman

O'Farrelly, Agnes Winifred (Ní Fhaircheallaigh, Úna; 'Uan Uladh') (1874–1951), academic, was born 24 June 1874 in Raffony, Virginia, Co. Cavan, one of five daughters and three sons of Peter Dominic O'Farrelly and Ann O'Farrelly (née Sheridan), a family with a traditional interest in the Irish language. After her articles 'Glimpses of Breffni and Meath' were published in the *Anglo-Celt* in 1895, the editor, E. T. O'Hanlon, encouraged her to study literature. Graduating from the Royal University of Ireland (BA 1899, MA 1900), she was appointed a lecturer in Irish at Alexandra and Loreto colleges. A founder member in 1902, along with Mary Hayden (qv), of the Irish Association of Women Graduates and Candidate Graduates, to promote equal opportunity in university education, she gave evidence to the Robertson (1902) and Fry (1906) commissions on Irish university education, arguing successfully for full co-education at UCD. Appointed lecturer in modern Irish at UCD in 1909, she was also a member of the first UCD governing body and the NUI senate (1914–49). In 1932, on the retirement of Douglas Hyde (qv), she was appointed professor of modern Irish in UCD, holding the position till her retirement in 1947, and was president of the Irish Federation of University Women (1937–9) and of the National University Women Graduates' Association (NUWGA) (1943–7).

One of the most prominent women in the Gaelic League, a member of its *coiste gnótha* (executive committee) and a director of the Gaelic press An Cló-Chumann Ltd, she was a close friend of most of its leading figures, especially Douglas Hyde, Kuno Meyer (qv), and Eoin MacNeill (qv). One of Hyde's allies in his battle to avoid politicising the league, she was so close to him that students in UCD 'enjoyed speculating about the nature of their friendship' (Dunleavy & Dunleavy, 361). She advocated pan-Celticism, but did not get involved in disputes on the matter within the league. A founder member, and subsequently principal for many years, of the Ulster College of Irish, Cloghaneely, Co. Donegal, she was also associated with the Leinster and Connacht colleges and served as chairperson of the Federation of Irish Language Summer Schools. Reputed to have poor spoken Irish (Brian Ó Nulláin (qv) claimed she had 'atrocious Irish' (Meenan, 241)), during a visit to the Aran islands she 'frightened a little Irish-speaking boy out of his wits. . . because she said to him one Sunday morning: "If you are going to hell I will go with you." She had mistaken the word *ifreann*, hell, for *Aifreann*, mass!' (Butler, 474).

Having presided at the inaugural meeting of Cumann na mBan (1914), espousing its subordinate role in relation to the Irish Volunteers, she left the organisation soon afterwards because of her support for recruitment to the British army during the world war. A close friend of Roger Casement (qv), in 1916 along with Col. Maurice Moore (qv) she gathered a petition that sought a reprieve of his death sentence. She was a member of a committee of women which negotiated unsuccessfully with

IRA leaders to avoid civil war in 1922, and was heavily defeated as an independent candidate for the NUI constituency in the general elections of 1923 and June 1927; in 1937 she was actively involved in the NUWGA's campaign against the constitution, seeking deletion of articles perceived as discriminating against women.

Popular among students at UCD, she had a reputation as a social figure and entertained frequently at her homes in Dublin and the Donegal Gaeltacht. A founder member (1914) and president (1914–51) of the UCD camogie club, she persuaded William Gibson (qv), 2nd Lord Ashbourne, to donate the Ashbourne cup for the camogie intervarsities, and was also president of the Camogie Association of Ireland in 1941–2. A supporter of native Irish industry, she was president of the Irish Industrial Development Association and the Homespun Society, and administrator of the John Connor Magee Trust for the development of Gaeltacht industry. A poet and writer in both Irish and English, often using the pseudonym 'Uan Uladh', her principal publications in prose are *The reign of humbug* (1900), *Leabhar an Athar Eoghan* (1903), *Filidheacht Segháin Uí Neachtáin* (1911), and her novel *Grádh agus crádh* (1901); and in poetry *Out of the depths* (1921) and *Áille an domhain* (1927). She retired from UCD in 1947, lived at 38 Brighton Road, Rathgar, and died 5 November 1951 in Dublin, leaving an estate valued at £3,109; she never married. An oil portrait by Seán Keating (qv), RHA, was presented to her by the NUWGA on her retirement.

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*Ir. Independent*, *Ir. Press*, *Ir. Times*, 6 Nov. 1951; *Anglo-Celt*, 10 Nov. 1951; Dame Columba Butler, 'Agnes O'Farrelly and Aran', *Capuchin Annual 1952*, 473–8 (photo); Mary M. Macken, 'Women in the university and the college: a struggle within a struggle', Michael Tierney (ed.), *Struggle with fortune* (1954), 142–65; James Meenan, *Centenary history of the Literary & Historical Society* (1955); Michael Tierney, *Eoin MacNeill* (1980); Mary J. Hogan, *University College Dublin Women Graduates' Association, 1902–1982* (1982); Thomas J. Morrissey, *Towards a national university* (1983); *Beathaisnéis a hAon* (1986); Margaret Ward, *Unmanageable revolutionaries* (1989); Janet Egleson Dunleavy and Gareth W. Dunleavy, *Douglas Hyde* (1991); Walker; Proinsias MacAonghusa, *Ar son na Gaeilge* (1993); Patrick Meenan, *St Patrick's blue and saffron* (1997); Donal McCartney, *UCD* (1999)