

## 'Wishes For My Son, Born On St Cecilia's Day, 1912'

By Thomas MacDonagh

*NOW, my son, is life for you,  
And I wish you joy of it,—  
Joy of power in all you do,  
Deeper passion, better wit  
Than I had who had enough,  
Quicker life and length thereof,  
More of every gift but love.*

*Love I have beyond all men,  
Love that now you share with me—  
What have I to wish you then  
But that you be good and free,  
And that God to you may give  
Grace in stronger days to live?*

*For I wish you more than I  
Ever knew of glorious deed,  
Though no rapture passed me by  
That an eager heart could heed,  
Though I followed heights and sought  
Things the sequel never brought.*

*Wild and perilous holy things  
Flaming with a martyr's blood,  
And the joy that laughs and sings  
Where a foe must be withstood,  
Joy of headlong happy chance  
Leading on the battle dance.*

*But I found no enemy,  
No man in a world of wrong,  
That Christ's word of charity  
Did not render clean and strong—  
Who was I to judge my kind,  
Blindest groping of the blind?*

*God to you may give the sight  
And the clear, undoubting strength  
Wars to knit for single right,  
Freedom's war to knit at length,  
And to win through wrath and strife,  
To the sequel of my life.*

*But for you, so small and young,  
Born on Saint Cecilia's Day,  
I in more harmonious song  
Now for nearer joys should pray—  
Simpler joys: the natural growth  
Of your childhood and your youth,  
Courage, innocence, and truth:*

*These for you, so small and young,  
In your hand and heart and tongue.*

### AN ASSESSMENT DR LUCY COLLINS

TO the rebels of 1916, the future of Ireland was closely linked to the next generation of Irish men and women, who would keep revolutionary ideals alive. In this poem, Thomas MacDonagh commemorates the birth of his son by meditating on his own hopes for the future. This vision is dominated by love, which both binds father and child together and shapes how human meaning is created here.

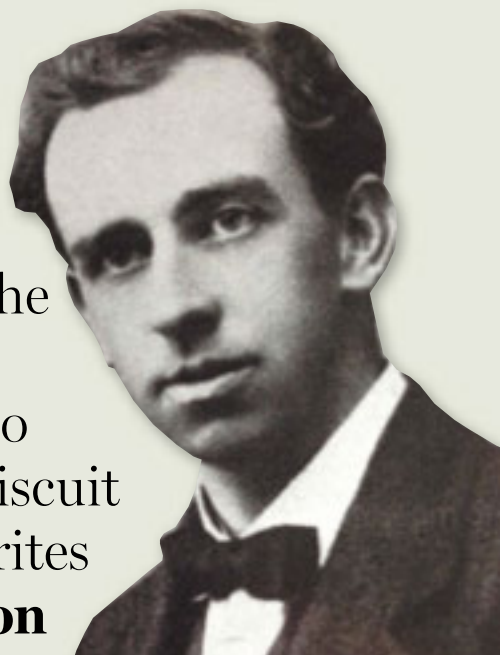
MacDonagh wishes that his son be 'good and free', linking morality with personal liberty. Here, as elsewhere in his work, he reveals the tension between individual and collective viewpoints — a tension which fundamentally shapes how freedom itself can be understood. Idealism lies at the heart of this poem, but it is a different kind of idealism to that contemplated by Pearse or Plunkett.

Though MacDonagh invokes the 'martyr's blood', he recognises that violent enmity is at odds with religious feeling. He chooses instead to highlight the role of redemption; the long and patient quest for lasting freedom. The poem moves from larger, abstract aims, to the simplest of wishes for the child: that he will grow naturally in 'courage, innocence and truth'.

## THOMAS MacDONAGH

# Charm offensive

Thomas MacDonagh's intense political nationalism was the backdrop to him leading 150 men to seize the Jacob's biscuit factory in 1916, writes Catherine Wilsdon



*"I know this is a lousy job, but you're doing your duty — I do not hold this against you."*

THESE are the words of the poet-patriot Thomas MacDonagh standing before the nervous firing squad tasked with his execution. During that tense moment, the 12 young Sherwood Foresters may well have reminded him of his own students at St Enda's or UCD. In a final display of characteristic generosity, the revolutionary leader offered them his cigarettes. These last moments lay testament not only to the strength of character recalled by those who knew him, but also to his great ability to connect with people as a friend, leader, teacher, poet or playwright. But how had this gentle, personable scholar ended up handcuffed and blindfolded in the stonebreakers' yard at Kilmainham Gaol?

Born in Cloughjordan, Co Tipperary, MacDonagh was educated at Rockwell College where he briefly entertained the idea of becoming a missionary priest before deciding upon a career in education. A teaching position at St Kieran's College brought him to Kilkenny where he joined the Gaelic League and his passion for the Irish language and culture was kindled.

While teaching English, French, and History at the college, he published two volumes of poetry and became increasingly active in the League's social and cultural activities. It was during this time that MacDonagh became fluent in the Irish language and grew dissatisfied with the absence of the subject on the St Kieran's curriculum. This prompted him to take up a position at St Colman's College, Fermoy, where he taught for five years before joining Patrick Pearse at his experimental Irish-language school in Dublin, St Enda's.

MacDonagh held the position of assistant headmaster at Pearse's school

during which time he studied for a BA in French, English, and Irish at University College Dublin. Following the completion of an MA in English Literature he began lecturing at the university. In 1912 he married Muriel Gifford with whom he had two children. He continued to write poetry, plays and literary criticism during this time and, with his friends Mary and Padraic Colum, Joseph Mary Plunkett, James Stephens, and David Houston, he edited the *Irish Review* — a magazine of literature, art and science. A supporter of rights for women and workers, he was a member of the Irish Women's Franchise League, the Industrial Peace Committee, and a founding member of the teachers' union, ASTI.

Primarily engaged in nationalist endeavours of a cultural kind, the events of the Dublin Lockout contributed to the intensification of MacDonagh's political nationalism and in December 1913 he joined the Irish Volunteers. Elected to company captain in July of the following year, his talkative and charming personality was put to use as he travelled the country with the aim of recruiting volunteers. At the same time the editorial of the *Irish Review* indicated a transition from ideals into action as the magazine published more outwardly political pieces such as the "Manifesto of the Irish Volunteers".

In July 1914, alongside Bulmer Hobson

### SNAPSHOT

#### THOMAS MacDONAGH

**Born:** 1 February 1878, Cloughjordan, Co Tipperary

**Educated:** Rockwell College

**Affiliation:** Irish Volunteers, IRB

**Career:** Teacher, St Enda's; lecturer, UCD

**Died:** 3 May 1916, Kilmainham Jail

and Darrell Figgis, MacDonagh played an important role in the Howth gun-running during which rifles and ammunition were smuggled in from Germany. Making their way back from Howth, the Volunteers were apprehended at Fairview by the British Army and the Dublin Metropolitan Police. Though a brief scuffle broke out, the leaders managed to prevent the standoff from escalating. While Figgis and the ever-talkative MacDonagh engaged the assistant commissioner of the DMP — William Vesey Harrell — in a prolonged argument, Hobson dispersed the volunteers.

March 1915 saw MacDonagh sworn into the Irish Republican Brotherhood and appointed Commandant of the 2nd Battalion, Dublin Brigade. However, it wasn't until April 1916 that he became the seventh member of the Military Council, which had been established the previous year and included Pearse, Plunkett, Éamonn Ceannt, Seán MacDiarmada, Thomas Clarke and James Connolly. MacDonagh was Director of Equipment but was not informed about the plans for the rising until just before Easter week.

In the week leading up to the Rising, MacDonagh played an important role as intermediary between the Council and his colleague at UCD, Eoin MacNeill, who was opposed to the Volunteers engaging in offensive force. Once MacNeill was made aware of the plans for a rising, MacDonagh was tasked with persuading him to pledge his support. Believing that a British attack was imminent and that a German ship would soon deliver arms in Kerry, MacNeill briefly backed the insurrection. However, the interception of the ship by the British Navy prompted him to issue a countermanding order on the eve of Easter Sunday. That same day the leaders convened and planned a Monday rising instead. In an effort to divert attention from the revised plan, MacDonagh visited MacNeill at home to deliver Pearse's