

MacDonagh, Thomas

by Lawrence William White

MacDonagh, Thomas (1878–1916), teacher, writer, and republican revolutionary, was born 1 February 1878 in Cloughjordan, Co. Tipperary, third child and eldest son among six surviving children (four sons and two daughters; three elder children had died in infancy) of Joseph MacDonagh (1834–94), native of Co. Roscommon, and Mary MacDonagh (née Parker), Dublin native of English parentage (her father had moved to Dublin to become compositor in Greek for Trinity College Press); both were national school teachers. His father (who claimed descent from the medieval Mac Donnchadha clan of Ballymote castle, Co. Sligo), the son of a small farmer, received through the efforts of his widowed mother and her brother, a parish priest, teacher training in Dublin. He met and married MacDonagh's mother while both were teaching in Cloghan, Co. Offaly; they were transferred to Cloughjordan the year before MacDonagh's birth. Both parents were averse to political partisanship ('great cry and little wool, like the goats of Connacht' in his father's estimate (Parks, 1)). While his father's was a jovial, kindly, indulgent personality, MacDonagh received from his mother (a convert before marriage from unitarianism to Roman catholicism) deep interests in music and literature, and a grave sense of high moral purpose.

Education and early career After primary education under his father in Cloughjordan, MacDonagh studied under the Holy Ghost fathers at Rockwell College, Cashel, Co. Tipperary (1892–6), where in 1894 he entered the order's junior scholasticate to prepare for the catholic priesthood. Joining the college faculty as teacher of English, French, and Latin literature (1896–1901), after experiencing a profound crisis of faith he abandoned his vocation for the priesthood for a career as teacher and writer. While senior master of English, French, and history at St Kieran's College, Kilkenny (1901–03), he attended a Gaelic League meeting for a lark, intending to scoff at the proceedings, but instead was moved to a conversion of Pauline peremptoriness, his self-described 'baptism in nationalism' (Norstedt, 26). Immersed in the league's social and cultural activities, elected to the Kilkenny branch executive committee, he attended summer language classes on Inishmaan, Co. Galway (1902), becoming in time a fluent Irish speaker and writer. Each of his first two volumes of poetry – *Through the ivory gate* (1902) and *April and May* (1903) – is redolent of the two successive obsessions of his early adulthood: the spiritual anguish suffered at Rockwell (charted from simple, naïve faith, through a brooding pessimism culminating in nightmarish despair, to restored emotional and spiritual balance in a devout but heterodox catholic mysticism), and his conversion to Irish-Ireland nationalism.

Estranged from St Kieran's ethos by the latter enthusiasm, MacDonagh moved to a teaching post in the more religiously liberal and Gaelic setting of St Colman's College, Fermoy, Co. Cork (1903–08). After 1905 he drifted away from the language

movement, disillusioned by the humourless and blinkered zealotry of the more ardent activists. Discovering a new obsession in concentrated pursuit of his career in literature, he wrote the lyric of a sacred cantata, 'The exodus' (1904), with music by Bendetto Palmieri, RIAM, performed at the RUI and awarded first prize at the 1904 feis ceoil. The exclamatory rhetoric and emotional excess of the piece – tolerable in the context of chorale composition – intruded upon the contemporaneous verse of 'The praises of beauty', published as the opening sequence of *The golden joy* (1906), a volume expressing MacDonagh's spiritual movement from Christian mysticism to neo-platonism in its assertion of devotion to ideal, spiritual beauty, not Christian faith, as the means to redemption, and its concept of the poet as divinely inspired mediator between the spiritual world and the physical. In subsequent years MacDonagh moved further toward a free-thinking, non-dogmatic spirituality.

St Enda's, UCD, theatre, and poetry Seeking wider intellectual contact and literary opportunities, MacDonagh moved to Dublin to become resident assistant headmaster and instructor of language and literature (1908–10) in St Enda's college, Cullenswood House, Ranelagh, the progressive, Irish-language school newly opened by Patrick Pearse (qv), to whom he had become known through the Gaelic League. His first play, *When the dawn is come* (published concurrently with the Abbey Theatre production of November 1908), takes as protagonist an idealistic poet turned nationalist revolutionary in an Ireland fifty years in the future; flawed by windy dialogue and unresolved elements of plot, the play deals with the poet's internal conflicts, and his external differences with fundamentalist, fanatical comrades. Well known in Dublin literary and theatrical circles, MacDonagh formed a particularly close friendship with Joseph Mary Plunkett (qv), whom he tutored in Irish and encouraged in poetical efforts, extending a determining hand toward production of the younger man's first book of verse, *The circle and the sword* (1911).

During his second year at St Enda's, MacDonagh read English, French, and Irish at UCD, graduating BA (1910). Shaken by an unhappy love affair with writer and teacher Mary Maguire (Mary Colum (qv)), he resigned from St Enda's at the time of the school's move to Rathfarnham, Co. Dublin. After a restorative six weeks in Paris, he assumed a semi-reclusive residence in the lodge of Grange House, Rathfarnham (whose owner, Professor David Houston of the College of Science, became an intimate friend), engaged in writing, post-graduate research, and part-time teaching at St Enda's (1910–12). The poems of *Songs of myself* (1910), notwithstanding the transparent allusion of the title, largely retain the intensely subjective poetic voice characteristic of MacDonagh's oeuvre, in preference to a Whitmanesque identification of the self with the representative man. Awarded a first-class honours MA by UCD (October 1911) – his thesis on English Elizabethan prosody was published as *Thomas Campion and the art of English poetry* (1913) – he was appointed full-time assistant lecturer in English at the university (1911–16). As in his earlier posts, he was a lively and stimulating teacher, sincerely engaged with his students, albeit prone to discursiveness and abstraction; his lectures were remembered as 'never relevant and invariably interesting' (McCartney, 65).

With a coterie of close literary friends (Houston, Mary Maguire, James Stephens (qv), and Padraic Colum (qv)), MacDonagh was co-founder and associate editor of the *Irish Review* (March 1911–November 1914), a literary and topical monthly, initially without political affiliation, and attracting an impressive range of prominent contributors. The *Review* printed his second play, 'Metempsychosis', a satire of theosophy and related esoteric doctrines, with a wickedly accurate caricature of William Butler Yeats (qv); the play was misinterpreted by contemporary audiences as serious comment when performed by the amateur Theatre of Ireland (1912). The volume *Lyrical poems* (1913) collected the works from MacDonagh's first three books that he wished preserved alongside new material, including mystical poems, nationalist ballads, and translations from the Irish, the latter comprising some of his sturdiest poetic achievement. From 1914 he managed the Irish Theatre in the Hardwicke Street Hall, Dublin, co-founded with Plunkett and Edward Martyn (qv) in reaction to the Abbey's prevailing diet of peasant comedy and Yeats's poetic drama, and producing original plays in Irish, in English by Irish authors, and translations into English from continental drama.

The Irish Volunteers MacDonagh's third play, *Pagans* (produced by the Irish Theatre in April 1915, and published posthumously in 1920), holds interest for an autobiographical subtext. The central conflict between irresponsible bohemian individuality and socially respectable bourgeois domestic convention concludes with the protagonist declaring his newfound devotion to a reborn Irish nation, a resolution neither irresponsible nor conventional. The theme reflects MacDonagh's own gradual progress from cultural nationalist to physical-force political separatist, initiated by his witnessing the police baton charge down Sackville St. on 'Bloody Sunday' during the 1913 Dublin lockout; thereafter he was active in the Dublin Industrial Peace Committee, whose efforts at independent mediation were frustrated by the employers' intransigence. Enrolling in the Irish Volunteers within a week of their formation (December 1913), and appointed to the armed body's governing provisional committee, he was elected a company captain (July 1914). Initially he regarded the body not as a vehicle for insurrection, but as an armed, militant pressure group, embracing the spectrum of nationalist opinion, in counter-balance to the Ulster Volunteers, to assure British implementation of home rule. His oratorical eloquence, punctuated by melodramatic posturing, contributed to his effectiveness in recruitment efforts countrywide. In association with Plunkett, who had purchased the *Irish Review* from Houston in June 1913, he turned the journal into a virtual mouthpiece for Volunteer policy until its demise in November 1914.

The outbreak of the first world war radicalised his outlook. He was among the twenty members of the provisional committee who repudiated the Woodenbridge declaration by parliamentary party leader John Redmond (qv) pledging Volunteer support for the British war effort. Although he attended the secret meeting of advanced nationalists (9 September 1914) that resolved to prepare for an armed insurrection during the course of the European war, and despite being sworn by March 1915 into the secret Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB), he was not privy

to the detailed planning for the rising until the last few weeks before Easter 1916. Serving on both the central executive and the general council after the Volunteers' first general convention (October 1914), he was appointed to the headquarters staff as director of training (December 1914). Appointed commandant of the 2nd Bn, Dublin Bde (March 1915), he also became brigade commandant with authority over the four city and one county battalions. He assumed a major role in the organisation of the funeral of IRB veteran Jeremiah O'Donovan Rossa (qv), and served as Volunteer acting commandant general for the funeral march (1 August 1915).

The Easter rising MacDonagh's vital importance as Dublin brigade commandant was probably the reason for his co-option in early April 1916 to the IRB's secret military council, then finalising preparations for the rising; he was the last of the seven council members to be added. Another factor may have been his relationship with Volunteer Chief of Staff Eoin MacNeill (qv), a UCD faculty colleague; in the final confused days before Easter Monday, MacDonagh was intermediary between the conspirators and MacNeill, when the latter became belatedly cognisant of the intended insurrection. Pursuant to the military council's decision on Easter Sunday morning to postpone the rising by one day to the Monday, MacDonagh in his capacity as brigade commandant signed an order confirming MacNeill's public announcement cancelling Easter Sunday manoeuvres, but ordering all volunteers to remain in Dublin pending further directives. At a subsequent final meeting with MacNeill he gave a feigned and trusted assurance that the insurrection had indeed been cancelled.

On Easter Monday morning (24 April), MacDonagh issued the order deploying the Dublin Brigade for muster, and as a member of the provisional government signed the declaration of the republic. His battalion divided between two mobilisation centres – a modification of plans to allow for the effects of MacNeill's countermand upon the number of available men – MacDonagh commanded a force of 150 volunteers that occupied Jacob's biscuit factory, Bishop St., a strong position surrounded by a warren of narrow lanes. In the early afternoon an outpost of his command disregarded his orders by firing prematurely on an advance party of British troops advancing from Portobello barracks down Camden St. to relieve Dublin Castle, thereby forgoing the opportunity to enfilade the main party and inflict heavy casualties. Although snipers in the factory's immense towers harassed enemy patrols throughout the week, no further attempt was made to assault the garrison. MacDonagh's leadership through the week was erratic: hearty but indecisive, he tended inexplicably to amend or rescind orders.

On Sunday 30 April, MacDonagh, the senior Volunteer officer remaining in the field and occupying such an impregnable (if strategically ineffectual) position, initially declined to accept the surrender order issued the previous day, on the grounds that Patrick Pearse, being in enemy custody, had issued the directive under duress. After parleying with the British commander, Gen. Lowe, he was conveyed by motorcar to the South Dublin Union. There, after conferring with 4th Bn commandant

Éamonn Ceannt (qv), he agreed to surrender. MacDonagh thereupon countersigned Pearse's order, which, dispatched to the other garrisons still in the field, effectively ended the rising. Convicted and sentenced to death, he was shot by firing squad in Kilmainham gaol on 3 May 1916, with Pearse and Thomas Clarke (qv) the first three of the insurrection leaders to face execution. The authenticity of a document widely circulated after the rising, purporting to be an ardent statement made by MacDonagh at his court-martial, has been heatedly debated; transcripts of the proceedings made public in 1999 do not indicate that such a statement was made.

Family MacDonagh married (3 January 1912) Muriel Gifford (qv), sister of Grace Gifford (qv), who married MacDonagh's intimate friend and revolutionary comrade Joseph Plunkett on the eve of his execution. They had one son, author and barrister Donagh MacDonagh (qv), and one daughter, Barbara MacDonagh Redmond (b. 1915). Initially residing at 32 Baggot St., at the time of the rising the family lived at 29 Oakley Rd, Ranelagh. Named by MacDonagh with David Houston as his joint literary executors, Muriel MacDonagh helped prepare for publication a compilation, *The poetical works of Thomas MacDonagh* (October 1916), which included some previously unpublished material. Prone to illness and nervous disorder, and emotionally devastated by her husband's death, she drowned while swimming in the sea off Skerries, Co. Dublin (9 July 1917).

MacDonagh's youngest brother, Joseph (qv), prominent in the post-rising reorganisation of Sinn Féin, served in the first and second dáils, and opposed the Anglo-Irish treaty of 1921. His eldest sibling, Mary Josephine MacDonagh (1872–1954), entered the Sisters of Charity, teaching and ministering to the sick in the order's schools, hospitals, and hospices in Dublin; her name in religion was Sister Mary Francesca. She was the only member of Thomas MacDonagh's family to visit him in Kilmainham jail on the eve of his execution. The other sister, Ellen MacDonagh (b. 1876), married Daniel Bingham, of Ballina, Killaloe, Co. Mayo, RIC sergeant and latterly petty sessions clerk. After his death she followed their three sons to the USA, where she died in New York city.

John MacDonagh (1880–1961), the second eldest brother, after training as a singer in Italy, toured Britain and America as an actor and operatic tenor. In 1914 he became actor-manager of the Irish Theatre, of which Thomas MacDonagh was a co-founder; he produced and acted in various of the company's offerings, including several comedies of his own composition. He fought in the Easter rising under Thomas's command in the Jacob's factory garrison, after which he was imprisoned in England. He directed several motion pictures, including *Willie Reilly and his colleen bawn* (1920), filmed in the grounds of St Enda's, in which he also acted, and a short propaganda film (1919) advertising the republican loan bonds, featuring Arthur Griffith (qv), Michael Collins (qv), and other members of the first dáil. His most successful play, 'The Irish Jew' (1921), starred Jimmy O'Dea (qv) in his first major role, as a Jewish city councillor who becomes lord mayor of Dublin. Frequently revived in Dublin, the play also ran on Broadway. MacDonagh

directed O'Dea in three films during 1922, and featured him in his revue 'Dublin tonight' (1924), the first Irish production in the genre. He remained prominent as writer, producer, and actor in stage shows and on 2RN (latterly Radio Éireann), on which he also reviewed books and theatre. He worked for the station as productions officer (1935–47), after which he produced the sponsored radio programme for the Irish Hospitals' Sweepstakes. The third eldest brother, James MacDonagh (1881–1931), an accomplished musician on several instruments, became first oboist and performer on the cor anglais with the British Symphony Orchestra. His son, Terence MacDonagh (1907/08–86), also played on the oboe and cor anglais with both the BBC Symphony Orchestra, of which he was a founder member, and with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra under Sir Thomas Beecham; he served on the board of the Royal College of Music.

Assessment Yeats's assertion in 'Easter 1916' that Thomas MacDonagh at the time of his death 'was coming into his force' seems a considered assessment, both in terms of the man's poetry and his scholarship. MacDonagh's poetic reputation rests on a handful of late lyrics – some original ('The night hunt', 'The man upright'), some translations ('The yellow bittern') – in which for the first time he attained to a precision of imagery and a lucid colloquial diction that portended a breakthrough into a unique poetic voice. His foremost contribution to literature resides in his criticism. The posthumous publication *Literature in Ireland: studies Irish and Anglo-Irish* (1916), completed hastily amid the manifold preoccupations of his last year, while uneven and fragmentary in structure, contains a central core of coherent argument and demonstration. A scholarly synthesis of ideas current among the literary revivalists, the book is a pioneering definition of the distinctive character of Anglo-Irish literature and the influences that shaped it in directions different from the literature of England. Analysing the impact of Gaelic poetry and Hiberno-English speech on what he termed 'the Irish mode' in English-language poetry, MacDonagh's treatment of Irish and Anglo-Irish literature as occupying a shared cultural continuum adumbrated a critical approach not to be revived until the latter twentieth century.

Short in stature but of sturdy physique, with crispy brown hair and large grey eyes, MacDonagh had an open, verbose, ebullient persona ('a thousand opinions and the words to sustain them' (Shannon, 124)). His mischievous humour and infectious cheer masked profound inner turmoil and insecurity, the wracking doubt and despair exposed in his more personal poetry. A man of contrasting extremes, torn between contemplation and action, his life was a restless quest for meaning and fulfilment through some all-consuming commitment, a succession of withering disillusionments and fervent new beginnings. The Irish Volunteers were the last, and fatal, oscillation of the cycle.

Among several portraits, the most notable is the bronze head by Oisín Kelly (qv) in the common room of UCD, Belfield. The most moving elegy was composed in verse by Francis Ledwidge (qv).

GRO (birth cert.); *Catholic Bulletin*, vi, no. 7 (July 1916), 395–7; Padraic Colum (ed.), introduction to *Poems of the Irish Revolutionary Brotherhood* (1916), ix–xxxvi: xxv–xxxii; *Capuchin Annual 1942*, 214–18, 368, 374–5; Donagh MacDonagh, ‘Thomas MacDonagh,’ *An Cosantóir*, v, no. 10 (Oct. 1945), 525–34; Diarmuid Lynch, *The IRB and the 1916 insurrection* (1957); *Ir. Times, Ir. Independent*, 3 July 1961; F. X. Martin (ed.), *The Irish Volunteers 1913–1915: recollections and documents* (1963), *passim*; Max Caulfield, *The Easter rebellion* (1964); *Capuchin Annual 1966*, 162–3, 214–18; Padraic Colum, ‘Thomas MacDonagh and his poetry,’ *Dublin Magazine*, v, no. 1 (spring 1966), 39–45; *Ir. Times*, Easter rising supplement, 7 Apr. 1966; Breandán MacGiolla Choille (ed.), *Intelligence notes 1913–16* (1966); F. X. Martin (ed.), *The Easter rising and University College Dublin* (1966); Martin Shannon, *Sixteen roads to Golgotha* (c.1966), 122–31; Marcus Bourke, ‘Thomas MacDonagh’s role in the plans for the 1916 rising,’ *Irish Sword*, viii (1967–8), 178–85; Maurice Gorham, *Forty years of Irish broadcasting* (1967); F. X. Martin (ed.), *Leaders and men of the Easter rising: Dublin 1916* (1967); Edd Winfield Parks and Aileen Wells Parks, *Thomas MacDonagh: the man, the patriot, the writer* (1967); O. Dudley Edwards and Fergus Pyle (ed.), *1916: the Easter rising* (1968), 18–19, 149–52; *Memoirs of Desmond Fitzgerald: 1913–1916* (1968); Kevin B. Nowlan (ed.), *The making of 1916: studies in the history of the rising* (1969), 166, 172–3, 184–6, 219, 222, 226–32, 245–6, 257, 260–01, 271, 291, 298; Piaras F. Mac Lochlainn (ed.), *Last words: letters and statements of the leaders executed after the rising at Easter 1916* (1971); Sydney Czira, *The years flew by* (1974); Leon Ó Broin, *Revolutionary underground: the story of the Irish Republican Brotherhood 1858–1924* (1976); Ruth Dudley Edwards, *Patrick Pearse: the triumph of failure* (1977); Johann A. Norstedt, *Thomas MacDonagh: a critical biography* (1980); Roger McHugh and Maurice Harmon, *A short history of Anglo-Irish literature* (1982); Kevin Rockett, *Willie Reilly and his colleen bawn* (exhibition brochure) (1991); Declan Kiberd, *Inventing Ireland* (1995); Kevin Rockett, *The Irish filmography* (1996); *1916 rebellion handbook* (1998 ed.); Philip B. Ryan, *The lost theatres of Dublin* (1998); Michael Foy and Brian Barton, *The Easter rising* (1999); Patrick Maume, *The long gestation: Irish nationalist life 1891–1918* (1999); Donal McCartney, *UCD; a national idea: the history of University College, Dublin* (1999); Roche Williams, *In and out of school: in the home of the MacDonaghs* (1999); Declan Kiberd, *Irish classics* (2000); Pádraig Yeates, *Lockout: Dublin 1913* (2000); *Ir. Times*, 5 May 2001; Brian Barton, *From behind a closed door: secret court martial records of the 1916 Easter rising* (2002); Charles Townshend, *Easter 1916: the Irish rebellion* (2005); Geraldine Plunkett Dillon, *All in the blood: a memoir* (2006); information from Dara Redmond (grandson)